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MARVEL

TO

T. H. H.,

WITH A KISS OR TWO.

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MARVEL.

CHAPTER I.

"Hark! hark! deep sounds and deeper still
Are howling from the mountain's bosom.
* * * * * *
Earth groans as if beneath a heavy load."

AROUND the house the wind was crying with a mournful vehemence, every now and again flinging great heavy drops of rain against the window panes. The moon and stars, that half-an-hour ago were shining with an exquisite brilliance, now lay hidden behind banks of sullen clouds, and the fitful gusts of wind that dashed round the corners and moaned through the pine branches spoke of storm before the morning, whilst up from the sea came the sad monotonous roar of the waves as they thundered against the giant rocks.

The night, however, was full of a sultry heat that made even the small fire burning in the library grate almost oppressive. The casements were closed, but the curtains were not drawn, and the sad sounds of the rising storm penetrated through everything.

"There is thunder in the air," said Lady Mary, looking up thoughtfully. She spoke in a subdued tone, as if a little awed by the majesty of the elements without, and she let her hands fall idly on her knees as she listened gravely to the ever-growing tumult.

She was a woman who looked older than she really was, with a face beautiful still, in spite of many years of much trouble and settled ill-health. A tall, stately woman, with severely aristocratic features and a bearing not to be acquired. She was knitting placidly, the fine red silk she was using throwing out the pallor of her small hands. Occasion-

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ally she lifted her head to cast a glance of unaffected tenderness upon a lad of about fifteen, who was bending over a book at a small table near. A reading lamp stood on this table, and the boy's face betokened rather the earnestness of study than the enjoyment to be had of ordinary light reading.

He was her nephew, the son of her dead brother, the last of his name. In him—this youthful earl—all her hopes were centred, and she lavished upon him a mother's love—she who had never been a mother.

A sensitive change passed over her face as the storm swelled and grew. On just such a night as this her brother, Lord Wriothesley, the father of the lad over there, had been thrown from his horse and brought home to The Towers lifeless. On such a night—long years ago—her true love, to whom she was to have been married on that day week, was drowned off St. David's Head. Alas, for such storms as these! they boded no good to that old race to which she belonged, and which was now fast drawing to its close. She sighed heavily and leant back in her chair. Once more, mechanically, her fingers took up and continued the knitting, whilst her eyes travelled with an absent gaze—dedicated not to the living but to the dead—round the octagon room in which she was sitting.

It was a charming room, lofty and very carefully treated in its arrangements. There was no overcrowding, no pressure of furniture. One could stretch one's arms in it. The bookcases reached from floor to ceiling in the good old-fashioned style, and there was no glass to hide their treasures. There was, perhaps, too palpable a suspicion of an age now exploded, in the solidity of the central table and in some of the chairs, but this was rectified by the presence of the low soft satin-lined couches pushed here and there, very nests of comfort, and in the dainty tables that stood in every corner. Exquisite curtains, too, with threads of gold running through them, hung before the windows, and from the olive green walls priceless statuettes stood out prominently on carved brackets.

Another burst of wind, full of a greater ferocity than any gone before, now swept round that side of the house where

the library was, driving a heavy shower of rain against the windows.

"What a night!" said Lady Mary with a nervous start. The lad slowly withdrew his attention from the page before him, and looked at her.

"I like it," he said. He threw up his head as though drawing in and enjoying the warfare without. "What a sea there must be on to-night." He pushed back his chair and walked towards the window nearest him. Half-way across the room, however, he came to a standstill. His face paled, and his eyes took an eager strained expression. He was evidently listening for something. At the same moment Lady Mary cried out abruptly:

"What was that?" She, too, had risen, and now moved nearer to the boy. Her tall figure was drawn up to its full height; her fine eyes were alight; all the petty tremours that had shaken her a while agone now left her and gave place to a sudden courage. She stood calm and self-possessed, yet filled with a strange fear.

Through the storm a shrill wild cry was ringing, a faint and wailing cry, yet strong enough to pierce the riotous roar of the gale, and the dashing of the rain-drops on the gravel without. It was the cry of a child in sore distress —a miserable despairing scream.

Again it reached them. Nearer now, it seemed, yet so tossed hither and thither by the tempest that one scarce knew from what point it came. It was more plaintive, more exhausted now, and was horrible in its hopelessness, because youth and hope should go ever hand in hand. It was a wail that knew no cessation, and every moment brought it closer.

"Summon the servants—some creature in distress—" cried Lady Mary. She made a rapid movement towards the bell.

"No, no. I will go myself," said the boy, walking to the window that opened on to a long balcony.

"In this storm, Fulke! In this rain! Oh! no darling," entreated she, but he was not listening to her. With eager fingers he undid the fastenings of the casement, and as he stood thus, with arms uplifted, in an attitude that

to one outside might look protective, there came a sharp tapping at the glass below him. It was rapid, continuous, and full of the passionate vehemence of a terrified child. All through this tapping the cry rang ceaselessly.

Lord Wriothesley pulled open the casement with a vigorous hand, and there shivering in the vast wild darkness stood such a little forlorn thing as made their blood run cold.

It was a child—a mere baby. The cloak that had been wrapt round it had fallen back, and now the pretty, rounded, uplifted arms were dripping with the rain. The soft yellow locks, that should have been some mother's tenderest pride, were tangled, dark, and saturated with wet. The small face looked ghastly. Tears fell from the eyes, and gasping sobs from the red lips.

At this instant another violent gust arose, and rushing past the poor little thing caught her, and dashed her against the side of the open window. The tiny baby hands clutched convulsively at the wood-work, in a vague, instinctive fashion. No cry escaped her now. Her strength seemed gone.

"It is a child. A *child!*" cried Lady Mary in a horrified tone. She hurried towards her, but the little one had caught sight of Wriothesley, and held out her arms to him, and as he ran eagerly to her, and caught her, and lifted her into the warmth within, she clung to him with such a sense of sudden safety, as made itself felt, and went to the boy's heart.

The little wet arms clasped his neck. The frightened face was pressed against his shoulder. She was too young to argue, but she knew that she was safe. She was with friends. The rain no longer made her cold. The howling wind was not in here. And better than all else the awful darkness could be no longer felt.

Lady Mary took her now, and placed her on the hearth-rug close to the cheery fire, and shook out her dripping hair. She was drenched through and through. A maid was hastily summoned, and presently, in a miraculous way, clothes were produced fit for the tiny visitor's use—borrowed no doubt from the good woman at the lodge,

whose babies swarmed all over the place. In these the little stranger was dressed. Her pretty hair was dried, and shone now in the lamp-light like threads of gold; and her large, grave, wistful eyes—melancholy eyes for a creature barely four years old—lit up a singularly pretty face.

When Lady Mary questioned her as to her name, she would say nothing beyond a quaint monosyllable that no one could understand. "Mg" it sounded like, but the most enlightened English folk could make little of that.

"I confess it is too much for me," said Lady Mary, who, with the child on her lap, was feeding it with tea and cake, with a culpable disregard of quantity. "It hardly matters, however. She has strayed, no doubt, poor little thing, and to-morrow we shall be able to find and restore it to its parents. Dear, dear, how unhappy her poor mother must be to-night."

"I think she must be a stranger's child," said the boy, who was kneeling on the hearthrug and staring at the baby, who delighted him by her solemn gaze. "The servants know every soul in the village, but they don't know her."

"Nan—na?" said the child, glancing inquiringly round her and then up into Lady Mary's face. The latter laughed and kissed the earnest eyes.

"That doesn't tell us much," she said. "See how she laughs now! What a pretty rogue it is. I wish I could make out her name."

"Perhaps she hasn't an earthly one. Perhaps she has dropped from the skies," said Fulke laughing. "If so we shall have to give her one."

"Scarcely worth while for one night, is it?"

"Why yes. We must have some way of addressing her whilst she is our guest."

"It should be a marvellously pretty name to suit her," said Lady Mary, gazing tenderly into the little one's charming face.

"Why, there! you have christened her," cried Wriothesley gaily. "She shall be called Marvel, even though it be for this night only. Marvel," bending towards the child, "do

you like your new name, baby?" The child nodded her head sagely, and then wriggled down off Lady Mary's lap and toddled up to him. As he took her in his arms the door was opened, and the maid, who had undressed the little wanderer a while since, again entered the room.

"If you please, my lady, we found this locket pinned inside the child's dress," she said. As she spoke she held out a flat gold locket, very plain, and rather battered.

There was surprise in Lady Mary's face as she took it. She looked at it seriously for a moment, as if hesitating, and then opened it. Inside was the picture of a young man, with a handsome aristocratic face, but reckless, and with a touch of displeasing mockery in the light blue eyes. The mouth, however, was beautifully formed, and the brow broad and open.

Having dismissed the maid Lady Marv glanced thoughtfully from the picture to the child and back again. No, there was no likeness.

"It is strange," she said to the boy, who had come to lean over her shoulder and look at the portrait. "It is not an ordinary face, is it? It is, too, the face of a gentleman." She paused and looked towards the child, who was now curled up in the centre of a huge white rug, and slowly, but surely giving herself up an unwilling prey to sleep. "And that poor baby," she went on speaking to herself, "out in that storm alone—forsaken. What can be the meaning of this?" She spoke vaguely, and the boy only caught a word here and there. She was evidently very much perplexed, and a little sad. She viewed the sleeping child with an altered expression—one even kinder, tenderer than before.

"We shall know all about it to-morrow," said Fulke, who felt she was disturbed

"To-morrow, perhaps. And now go to bed, darling." She drew his head down to her and kissed him warmly.

"And the baby?"

"Somers will take charge of it to-night."

"Good-night, little Marvel," said the boy, stooping over

the child and pressing his lips to her cheek. "To-morrow will tell us your real name."

But it was many years before the real name was learned. The morning broke, bright with sunlight, and as calm and clear as though last night's storm had never been, but it brought to The Towers no anxious mother crying for her child. Day after day went by, week after week they waited, but still the child remained as alone in the world, as though she had indeed, as Fulke had said, "dropped from the sky." Advertisements were put in all the papers, and private inquiry was made, but with no result. And at last Lady Mary's secret belief that the child had been purposely abandoned became a public one. Not cruelly abandoned, perhaps, in spite of that terrible storm, but flung within Lady Mary's reach, trusting to the tales of clemency and love that grew like blossoms through her life, and endeared her to all the villagers.

But no village child was this! The regular features, the fine hair, the delicately formed nails on tiny hands and feet, all precluded the idea. That she had been deserted was beyond doubt, but by whom? and by what class? Lady Mary felt a touch of indignation, that grew even stronger as her eyes fell upon the little one dancing gaily in the sunlight on the terrace walk, hugging to her breast a horrible doll—noiseless, eyeless, hairless. She was such a lovely bit of Nature's best work that it seemed to Lady Mary a wanton waste of one of Heaven's sweetest gifts to let her go thus cruelly adrift.

Her kind eyes moistened as she looked at the little forsaken being, a tender unsullied thing, a young pure soul for whom her Lord had died. Of what could that one have been made who could send her floating upon the cold sea of this world's charity? She was still meditating mournfully on the strange story, the bare commencement of which lay in her hands, when the child saw her, ran to her, and with a fond certainty of welcome flung herself into her arms. After that Lady Mary forgot to pursue her painful thoughts. She caught the child to her heart, and from that hour accepted her as her own child.

CHAPTER II.

THE years fled swiftly, and as by degrees servants left, died, or got married, and others, strangers to that part of the country, took their places, that wild night's work fell into the background, and the child came to be considered as part of the family.

She was at first an amusement, then a joy, and at last a comfort to Lady Mary, whose health did not improve as time wore on. She took the little one into her inmost heart, and cherished her there without detriment to the love she bore Fulke. In but a little while, as it seemed to her, the boy sprang into early manhood, got his commission in the Hussars, and quitted the home nest. But the child remained. Of course, Wriothesley turned up at the old quarters every now and then, very frequently in fact, but naturally he had ceased to be part of the quiet life there, and his coming was an event in spite of their efforts to think it otherwise.

Lady Mary missed him more than she confessed, even to herself, and clung to the child with an eager fondness, that grew stronger each time Fulke came and went. She was such a pretty creature! Day by day she expanded into a fairer beauty, into rarer charms of mind and body. Fulke, who always declared he and Lady Mary had christened her, and who insisted on calling himself her godfather, held stoutly to the name given her on that eventful night, and so Marvel she had remained. It suited her, he said, as time transformed the pretty baby into a charming little girl, whose hair was the colour of copper, with the sun shining on it, and whose unfathomable grey eyes were grave and serene as a summer lake.

Lady Mary took great pains with her education. A governess beat into her fertile brain all the English that a girl should know, and three times a week masters came from town. Marvel accepted them all, and was docile and obedient, and imbibed their knowledge with little trouble to herself; but the *delight* she felt in learning she reserved for such lessons as the rector gave her, with whom

she was a special favourite. He was unmarried, a student, a book-worm; a strange man, self-centred up to this; but the child took hold of him and dragged him, whether he would or not, into the warm sunlight of her own young life. By degrees he grew to love her, and coaxed her into reading with him at such odd hours as he could give her; and with him she wandered hand in hand, o'er flood and fell, and into the mystic sweetness of the woods, learning at every step a great fresh truth—the ways of birds, the music of the insect world, the tender growth of the tiny flowers that thronged around their footsteps, and all the glad, mysterious joys of Nature.

It was an isolated life she lived, but one hedged in by love. There was only auntie, as she called Lady Mary, and her governess, and the rector, and Fulke. Only *sometimes* Fulke, which gave him, perhaps, a charm in her eyes the others did not possess. He came so seldom. Each time his stay seemed shorter than the last. He was so good to her, and in her eyes he was so brave, so tall, so handsome, that all her tender childish affection went out to him, and she gave him out of the warm treasure of her heart an innocent, faithful love.

The first knowledge of the world's pain, the first touch of anguish came to her, through him. He sailed for India, and suddenly it seemed to her as if the whole earth had grown empty. What a void his going left! He started, full of hope and pride as a young soldier should, leaving behind him a sad old woman whose every desire was bound up in him, and a slender, mournful child who was hardly to be consoled. It was a poignant grief, but time softened it. And, indeed, time was given it to die altogether before Wriothesley again set foot on English soil.

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Through the half-closed curtains the warm June sun was pouring its blinding rays. From the garden beneath uprose a perfume, straight from the hearts of the flowers that floated gently into the room. Marvel, with a little sigh of ecstasy, flung wider the window and leaned out

until her pretty head became entangled with the roses that drooped from the wall next her.

She was dressed in a simple white cambric, made rather loosely at the throat, from which some deep old lace fell softly. She moved her head rapturously from side to side, as if drinking in the beauty of the scene, which was as perfect a one as fair England could boast. Beyond—the rising hills, with the patches of pale green verdure, on which the sun rested lovingly, and with here and there a monster fir to catch the eye; there—the glimpse of undulating park with, in the far west, a sparkle of lake water, and here, beneath her, the swelling woods, the velvet lawn, the brilliant pasture and the merry, chattering, babbling stream. It was all so full of life, so calm, so satisfying, and the girl herself seemed a fitting part of it. She looked the very incarnation of youth in her white dress, a creature half-child, half-woman, with a still slumbering heart. Smiles came readily to her lips. Her eyes had forgotten their tears. She lived in the present and took no thought for the future, so happy was the life she led. The child's hair had been copper, the girl's was an exquisite chestnut, soft, wavy, crowning a forehead that was both broad and pure. The baby mouth had expanded and changed, as the mouth of a child must, but the deep gray earnest eyes remained the same. They were very tender, very true, and, somehow, they *held* one. The rector, who loved her, said once that they made him unhappy for her. They were the eyes of a dog, solemn, faithful.

It was early yet; nine o'clock had only just been struck, with quite a reprehensible waste of time, by the slow, old clock on the corridor. Marvel had come upstairs with her auntie's breakfast and "the post," and was now waiting whilst Lady Mary sipped her chocolate and dipped into her correspondence. There were many maids at "The Towers," but one sweet maiden only brought Lady Mary's tray to her bedside every morning. No other hands but Marvel's should touch it, no other face but hers introduce it between the satin curtains of the ancient, if elaborately beautiful old poster, that Lady Mary would not resign for the handsomest "modern" in the universe. She was very

feeble now, dear thing, and quite unequal to rising before noon.

The girl was still luxuriating in the delicious view when an agitated voice from within roused her from her musing.

"Marvel, come to me. He is to be here on the 19th. I have had a definite line from him. The 19th," cried Lady Mary in her eager, feeble way.

She laid down the foreign letter she was holding and looked at the girl, who stood transfixed as if hardly believing.

"Yes. It is true. The 19th. I thank God for it. My dear, dear boy."

As she leant back upon her pillows she looked so frail, so languid, as she reclined there that one almost wondered how life still dwelt in her. A little flush, however, born of the glad news, made her face bright.

"I shall see him again," she said, extreme gratitude in her tone, as she took up the letter and began to read it aloud to Marvel. "He writes from 'Gib,' as he calls it," with a soft, little laugh; "and in such spirits, dear fellow."

"The 19th," said the girl. "Why, it is quite close! It sounds like to-morrow. And after all these long years. Oh, it is incredible."

"Nonsense, dear child. Why, we have been looking forward to it for the last six months."

"I know. And yet it never seemed impossible until now, when it draws so near. I wonder," she hesitated, and then went on, "I wonder if he will be changed? *Greatly*, I mean. It all seems so long ago. When he went I was only twelve, now I am seventeen, and he must be twenty-eight. Quite old, it sounds. Doesn't it?"

"Quite young, dearest," said Lady Mary a little sadly.

One of the servants at this moment opened the door, and with a little courtesy to Lady Mary, addressed Marvel:

"Mrs. Bunch desired me to say, Miss Craven, that she would be very much obliged if you could come to her to the still-room. She would have come to you, but——"

"I shall be there in a few minutes," said Marvel. Mrs. Bunch was the housekeeper, and of late Marvel had given all the household directions. The servants, indeed, every

one, called her Miss Craven, that being the Wriothesley family name. The poor child had no name of her own, so Lady Mary had lent her one.

Marvel made a sign to the girl, who withdrew.

"Would you like me to speak now to Bunch of his rooms—Fulke's?" she asked. "The old suite, I suppose. But years make things look dingy, and I think the rooms would require——"

"Everything," cried Lady Mary with a touch of her old impulsiveness. "I would have nothing less than perfection. What! is it not his home-coming? What then should we spare? See to it, dearest. It is his own house, remember, and why should he——. Now that I think of it, Marvel, now that he has come to man's estate, surely a better suite should be assigned him. The west wing has some nice rooms, eh?"

"They would be strange to him," objected the girl tenderly. "Let him have the old ones—those he has been picturing to himself—when first he comes; they will seem more like home. Afterwards he can arrange as he likes." She came nearer to Lady Mary, and stooping over her, kissed her. "Do you know," she said slowly, with a pretty childish regret in her tone, "I don't like those words of yours, 'Man's estate.' Oh, auntie, I wish he was a boy again."

CHAPTER III.

"At whose sight all the stars
Hide their diminished heads."

THE conservatories were admirably cool, although the reception rooms outside were warm to languor, in spite of all the efforts made to insure a bearable temperature. The lights were brilliant, and the heavy sleepy odour of innumerable Dijon roses filled the air. Now and then "the voice of one that singeth" was uplifted, and the rising and falling of liquid notes travelled in a dreamy fashion to

those who were not happy enough to have secured a place near to the singer.

It was one of the Hon. Mrs. Verulam's musical evenings, and nearly every one worth knowing in town was present. It was very much overcrowded, and the heat was stifling, but people like a crowd; and women especially, in spite of their protests to the contrary, think nothing of any affair that does not half squeeze them to death. There were a good many dim recesses and suggestive ante-chambers, but these were given up to the sentimental few, and every one for the most part was in the glare of the lamp-light.

It was considerably after midnight when a young man entering an ante-chamber added yet another unit to the already too numerous guests. He made his way to where he saw Mrs. Verulam standing in a cloud of corn-coloured net, with here and there in it a gleam of yellow topaz.

"At last," she said, giving him her hand. "I had ceased to hope. I had quite given you up."

"I had given myself up for the matter of that," returned Lord Wriothesley. "But I knew how to wait, and, as you see, all things have come to me."

"So embarrassed as all that?" said she, arching her pretty brows. "A man so rich is singularly ungrateful to wear a countenance dissatisfied as yours." She laughed maliciously, and leaning towards him said with an affectation of sympathy, "Who is she, then? Can I help you to look for her?"

"Who should I be looking for? Have not I found you?"

"That suffices, my good cousin; I shall let you off the rest," retorted she, making him a little *moue*. "We have loved each other too well and too long for that. Yet one more question. Why are you not at The Towers just now? You were due there on the 19th. Eh?"

"Business, business, business; that most hateful of all things. I fancied myself sure of my leave, or I shouldn't have named the 19th when writing to Lady Mary; but the fact is the colonel can't let me off until the day after to-morrow."

"Metal more attractive," said she, just the vaguest sus-

picion of reproach in her tone. They were cousins, and the very best friends, and she had not liked to believe this of him—disrespect to the dear old Craven woman, who was her aunt as well as his, and the being she admired most on earth!

"It isn't like you to wrong me," he said gravely. "The metal is not forged, attractive enough to keep me from my allegiance to that dearest of women. Believe me, I feel the hours long that keep me from her and from——" with a little laugh—"her baby. You will not misjudge me now?"

"Oh no! Your word was ever as good as your bond. And I was wrong to doubt, of course; but one hears so many things in this gossiping Babylon, and——" She checked herself abruptly. "As to auntie," she went on, "you will find her as charming as ever, but rather more frail. A mind as heavenly as hers could hardly inhabit a robust body. And her baby! She has grown out of your knowledge, I doubt, into a tall, slim, willowy thing, straight as a wand, but for all else, she is a baby still."

She seemed a little enthusiastic on this subject, and might have said a good deal more on it, but she stopped abruptly, seeing something in Wriothesley's face that puzzled her. For one thing he was not attending, and he was looking over her shoulder at some object behind her. He did not actually start, but an undefinable light sprang into his eyes. It was a light not to be mistaken by so clever a student of human nature as she, and it betrayed him to her.

"Ah! so she is here to-night, after all," she said slowly. She turned her head and looked to where, at the end of the room, stood a small group of four or five persons. They had only just entered the ante-chamber, which was larger than most, and the central figure stood out from the others rather prominently. She was a tall woman, extremely slight without being lean, clad in an exquisite brocade of an aqua-marine shade. The others of the group were men, and they seemed to follow her, and bend over her with an assiduity that bespoke an eager desire to please. Her face was peculiar, and certainly would not

strike one at the first glance as being handsome, yet after even a short study of it, one found it difficult to forget. It was a haunting face, the more so that it was inscrutable, and without vivacity. There was not even a suspicion of colour in it, and the eyes, remarkably large and deep, gave it the appearance of even greater pallor than it possessed. Her hair was chestnut, of so ripe a tint that it very narrowly escaped being red, but it and the unfathomable eyes were the things that refused to quit the memory when she herself had gone by.

The aqua-marine brocade gave no warmth to her pale face, but was meant perhaps to throw out the brilliancy of the hair and eyes. If so, the idea was an immense success. Fragile sprays of clematis formed her shoulder-straps, and her long arms, though slender, were exquisitely formed, and shone against the vague green of her gown with a dazzling fairness.

The little throng of courtiers pushed towards her a fauteuil, and she sank into it with a languid grace; the long white arms fell across her knees.

"So it is, Mrs. Scarlett," said Mrs. Verulam, turning again to her cousin, and speaking with some excitement in her tone. "My dear Fulke, I can hardly congratulate you."

"Certainly not. It is far too soon," parried he with a laugh and a purposed misunderstanding of her words. She felt, however, there was meaning in his answer, and that he wished her to learn even at this early hour that it would be wise to refrain from uncivil mention of the lady in question.

"Ah, *so!*" she said a little coldly. "It is, of course, well to understand things. You knew Mrs. Scarlett in India?"

"For a month or six weeks—a mere moment out of one's life. I made her acquaintance just before leaving, in fact."

"She returned to England in your ship, did she not?"

"Yes."

"Another six weeks! Why, you are quite old friends. I have heard that a sea voyage ripens friendship as swiftly

as an Italian sun." She spoke now in the usual indifferent society tone, and without any of the playful kindliness of a moment since.

"So have I. It has, however, hardly ripened the friendship you speak of. As yet, Lady Scarlett and I are mere acquaintances."

"She does not look like any man's acquaintance," said Mrs. Verulam vaguely. "He should be all in all or not at all to her, I should fancy. Her slave or nothing."

Wriothesley glanced quickly at her.

"You dislike her?" he said.

"Dislike her. No. Why should I dislike her?"

"I wonder why you asked her here."

"As to that, one must follow the fashion, and she is the fashion now. Her fame travelled from India faster than she, and though we know she was originally only the daughter of a petty country squire, still we are all *enragées* to get her to come to our houses."

"Her fame?" questioned he. It seemed to be all that he had heard.

"As the cleverest beauty of her time! By-the-by, who is that with her now?"

An old man had joined the group round Mrs. Scarlett and was shaking hands with her.

"The Duke of Dawtry," said Wriothesley.

"Naturally; I should have known." Mrs. Verulam was silent for a moment, and then "Considering who she was, I must do her the justice to say she has made very considerable running in a short time," she said. "Alone too! Very little help was given her."

"You forget she married well," said Wriothesley, who was keeping his brow clear by a superhuman effort.

"Oh! That poor old Mr. Scarlett!" returned Mrs. Verulam, with a contemptuous shrug. "He was useful, no doubt—as the stepping-stone to the society beyond. By his means she was enabled to make her bow to the world. He took the theatre for her, as it were; the bell rang, the curtain went up, and lo! there she was before, it must be confessed, a very appreciative audience. She has proved herself a huge success, but—to aspire to a duke!"

She paused to look at him, and it seemed to her that though he kept his face impassive, he drew his breath somewhat sharply.

"You mean ——?" he said.

"Just that," with an eloquent little nod. "It is rather a flight, isn't it? but true for all that. She has him at her feet morning, noon, and —— Well, I expect morning and noon is good enough, we need not follow it farther. He too, you see, made her acquaintance in India, whither he went last year for pig-sticking, as he said, though, poor old gentleman, I should have said the pigs would have stuck him had they come to close quarters."

"You regard the duke as an aspirant to her hand?" asked Wriothesley.

She could not fail to remark that his face had grown remarkably pale.

"Ah! That is going so far," she said. She smiled curiously and looked down at the fan she was slowly moving too and fro. "To her hand? Oh! it is impossible to say as much as that. But as an aspirant to her favour——"

She broke off calmly, and left her speech to be continued by any one that chose.

"You are charming always, dear cousin," said Wriothesley, who was very pale. "But one small point you forget, the forbearance that a hostess owes to her guest."

He bowed very low to her and crossed the room to where Mrs. Scarlett sat enthroned amidst her courtiers. He stood on the outskirts of her kingdom, until presently it melted away sufficiently to let him feel himself almost alone with her. His Grace of Dawtry still remained with a few others, but he stood now apart, conversing with a minister who had made himself famous over the Irish question.

As Wriothesley approached her, Mrs. Scarlett, who very seldom gave any man her hand in greeting, received him with a smile.

"You are late," she said. Her voice was low, clear, *traînante*. Her curious eyes dwelt on him for a second or so, as if in study, and then, apparently satisfied with whatever knowledge she had gained, she let them fall again.

Wriothesley's eyes flashed.

"That is a kinder thing than you have said to me for many a day. It at least permits me a faint hope that you have missed me," he said.

There was some surprise in the glance she turned upon him, but in a moment it changed to one of veiled amusement, and she leaned back in her chair and smiled. At all times her smile was uncommon, and difficult of comprehension. It was here and gone almost in a breath, almost, before one was aware of it, and yet it made itself felt, and clung to one's memory in a cruelly persistent fashion. There was an instant lighting of the strange eyes, swift too, as ever lightning was—a veritable electric flash—a sudden parting of the lips, and then it was all over. The pale face caught back its calm again, and one might *almost* believe the smile had never been.

"It is you who have missed something," she said. "More than you know."

"Not more than I know." He looked at her very earnestly. "You I miss always," he said, "and these last interminable hours in which I have been kept from you in spite of all my efforts have been worse than death."

His face precluded the idea of exaggeration that his words might suggest. That he was fatally honest in what he said was hardly to be mistaken. Again that flickering smile swept her lips.

"That, perhaps," she said. "But I hardly alluded to so poor a loss as you would suggest. What you indeed *did* lose was one of Riccolo's happiest efforts; he sang just now sweeter than any nightingale."

He made an impatient gesture and a slight frown settled on his forehead. His eyes met hers with a passionate reproach in them that seemed to afford her once again some small amusement.

"How you give yourself away," she said. "Have you no thought for the morrow? If you expend your entire stock of sentiment now, what will you have in the future?"

"You—I hope," returned he promptly.

She had not expected such a daring answer, and for a moment was silenced by it.

"You are bold," she said, yet the boldness of his wooing

seemed to please her. She drew her skirts aside as if to grant him a seat beside her.

"No. Do not let us stay here," he entreated. "Let me take you to a place where one can breathe. The conservatories are comparatively speaking, cool."

"So I have been told ever since I came. It is the cry on every lip. The rooms are purgatory, the conservatories paradise, come, let us enter therein."

"Well? you went, you proved it true?" There is a jealous ring in his voice that does not escape her.

"I proved nothing. Because I withstood all blandishments, and up to this have clung to my purgatory. No, I did not go."

"But you will now," said Wriothesley impetuously. He bent over her. His eyes sought and met hers. He was very handsome, and suddenly, almost without her knowledge as it were, she found she had risen and was moving with him across the room.

CHAPTER IV.

"My heart is not to be moulded as she pleases!"

THIS singular abandonment of herself, this volition which was hardly of her own doing, astonished her, and gave quite a zest to the movement. She could have laughed aloud at herself, so strange seemed to her this swift surrender of her will.

As she passed by the Duke of Dawtry the old man started and came to her.

"What! going?" he said.

She smiled—her pretty evanescent smile, but said nothing.

"So soon? You leave us indeed desolate," went on the old beau with that air of courteous gallantry that had distinguished him thirty years ago. "A cruel resolution to come to."

"I am not perhaps so cruel as you believe me," said

Mrs. Scarlett in a low tone. She spoke very softly, and the glance that accompanied her words was lingering and replete with reproachful meaning, and the old man coloured beneath it as though he were a lad of eighteen. "I am not going home as you I think imagined. I am merely about to test the differences of certain temperatures with Lord Wriothesley, who, I believe, is learned on such matters."

She had gone on a step or two when the duke overtook her.

"You will be at home to morrow?" he asked hurriedly in a whisper that was yet not low enough to be unheard by Wriothesley for

"Lovers' ears are sharp to hear."

"From one to three," returned she calmly.

She went on again, and Wriothesley who accompanied her felt that his heart was beating with a very unpleasant force and that a sudden miserable suspicion was weighing down his heart. He made no attempt to break the silence that had fallen upon them, and Mrs. Scarlett, who was naturally quiet, did not help him to make conversation.

They entered a long conservatory on the south side of the house and walked up one of its fragrant green sides without encountering any one. The place seemed deserted. Tiny coloured lamps, infinite in number, swung from the roof, and, from amongst the branches of the taller shrubs, giving a rather Eastern air to the scene, and the sweet odour of tube-roses and heliotropes mingled and blended into one delicious whole all round them.

From the tall drooping shrubs fell showers of fragile blossoms that strewed the floor and floated in the marble basins of the fountains, whose scented waters dropped, with a rhythmical chant, into their bosoms.

"Will you sit here?" said Wriothesley, indicating a low lounge that gave room for two. But Mrs. Scarlett gliding by it seated herself upon a little frail spindle-legged chair.

"You spoke the truth," she said. "It is cool after that furnace beyond. Well—," looking straight at him and

speaking quickly, "how is it you are not down in the country with those old people of yours?"

"There is but one old person," said Wriothesley gravely. "My aunt, Lady Mary Craven. She," gently, "is my more than mother."

"One! But you told me of two who expected you."

"The other is my aunt's ward. A girl. A mere child."

"A child. Of what age then?"

"Seventeen perhaps. I am not sure," said Wriothesley carelessly.

"There is no such thing as a child of seventeen," said Mrs. Scarlett rather brusquely. "At that age, I——." She paused abruptly, and her face darkened; she grew suddenly rigid as one might who was dwelling on some long past but ever hateful remembrance, and suddenly a bursting sigh broke from her lips. Her fingers closed spasmodically upon her fan, and her nostrils dilated. A moment was sufficient to contain all this, and Wriothesley, whose thoughts were still filled with his jealous fears, saw nothing of it. It was all over very quickly. By the help of her powerful will she conquered the momentary weakness, and the face she now turned to him was as calm and immovable as usual.

"Tell me," she said, "when is it you go to see this child?"

"To-morrow I go to see my aunt. As for her ward, she was a remarkably sweet little soul when last I saw her, and, I confess, it will be a pleasure to me to see her too again, as it will be to gaze upon the parks and woodlands of my home, and all things that association have made dear."

He spoke simply and with sincerity. Mrs. Scarlett bit her lips, and opened and shut her fan with a little crashing noise. His whole manner raised within her a very demon of envy. Great heaven! how long it was since *she* felt like that! If she could only feel it again! The cruellest part of it all was the memory of the time when she *had* felt it! She drew her breath sharply.

"And how long do you intend to remain in your Arcadia?" she asked with a slight sneer. "For ever?

Once imbued with its charms the world no doubt will cry to you in vain. Am I to give you to-night an eternal farewell. Have you brought me here to receive it?"

She spoke jestingly, but there was something in her large violet eyes that roused him.

"Bid me return," he said. "Say but one word, and you know the disposal of me lies with you."

"To return! But how if I bid you stay!"

"I know you too well for that," returned he with a tender smile. "Even—even if I *could* be of any use to you, you would not grudge me to the dear old woman for awhile."

She was clever enough to understand that it would be unwise to press the subject.

"And what of the little one?" she said still lightly, though her strange eyes were full of fire.

"Why will you dwell on her? I tell you she is of no account," said Wriothesley impatiently. "What is she to you or me?"

"I hardly know——. And yet——." With a sudden shaking off of the languor habitual to her she rose to her feet. "This I do know," she said, "that I *hate* her!"

There was something terrible in the intensity of her tone and the expression of her face, which had grown ghastly. She stood there drawn up to her fullest height, shivering, trembling as if with some unknown dread. He was almost frightened by the change in her, but presently with a little sigh she recovered herself, and dropped back again into her chair.

"Who should imagine me so absurd?" she said, with a touch of angry self-contempt. "It is to you, to you alone I so betray myself. And that poor innocent, that cousin of yours, why should I dread her?"

Wriothesley, who had taken little heed of the last part of her speech, did not contradict her as to the relationship. A vague, sweet, wild hope that she was jealous of this girl had worked a very madness of joy within his breast. To be jealous is to love! Did she love him? The very thought was intoxication. He pressed her back upon her seat, and fell at her knees and clasped them.

"My beloved!" he said in a choked voice, and then, "Leonie, hear me. Let me speak at last. That I love you is understood; but my anguish of to-night, who shall understand that?" He lifted a face that had grown suddenly haggard, to hers. "It is not true what they say, is it? That you—you—let that old man follow you about, make love to you, and that you——" He bent his head upon her knees, and she could feel his whole frame trembling—"encourage him. My darling! My soul! say it is not so. . . See now, Leonie, I am young. I am rich. Oh! how thankful I am for that! Why should he be preferred before me?"

"Why indeed. And who told you that he was?" Her voice was singularly soft and low. It was meant for his soothing, and it fulfilled its task. She was a little upset by his vehemence, and a little unnerved. What if any one should come in, and see him kneeling here at her feet, and so disturbed. What if Dawtry should hear of it? Better to quiet him at once, and so get rid of him.

But not altogether. It would be folly to break with him entirely until the old man should have declared himself. When that happened it would be time enough to cast Wriothesley adrift. And—and—suppose the duke should fail her, what *parti* of the season, except the duke, was as desirable as Wriothesley? Truly, it would be folly to discard him so soon.

The fertile brain of her drags in and threshes out all this, even whilst he kneels at her feet, with all his heart laid open to her.

"What is that old man to me?" she said treacherously.

"Do not say anything you do not mean," cried Wriothesley fiercely. He caught her hands and pressed them to his lips. "I beseech you, above all things, be honest with me."

He was honest enough himself at all events. His large eloquent eyes burning into hers bespoke a world of unadulterated affection.

"Why should you suspect me?" said she gently. She did not chide him for his violence, or seek to disengage her hands from his embrace. She took in the beauty of him as

he knelt there before her, pale and earnest, and was for the moment, so far womanly, that she cursed fate that Dawtry was not such an one as he.

"Give me one word of hope," entreated he vehemently.

He might have said more, but luck was on her side, and circumstances so fell out that she was saved the necessity of a reply. The musical dropping of the waters was broken by the sound of approaching footsteps. Wriothesley rose to his feet and stood beside her, as two or three people, talking, laughing, advanced towards them, and seated themselves on an ottoman near. All hope of a continued *tete-à-tete* was at an end. He could not speak, but his eyes were eloquent as they rested on hers. She plucked a flower from the bouquet she held and gave it to him. To him it seemed a kindly answer to his prayer. In reality it was given with a view to calming him. He thrust it hurriedly into his breast.

"You go to your home to-morrow," she said softly. "I shall see you the day after."

"What an eternity lies between now and then!" he replied passionately. "Oh! that one could annihilate those empty hours."

CHAPTER V.

"Her birth was of the wombe of morning dew,
And her conception of the joyous prime."

He had elected to walk from the station to his old home, which was but a mile or so from the village. All his way lay through a glorious stretch of woodland and meadow, full to overflowing with old, sweet memories to him. Each footstep awoke in him a strange sense of the unreality of the present—of the undying vitality of the past. As he came within view of the house, and whilst he was yet a long way from it, he saw the tall, shaggy deerhound, that had been but a baby when he left, stalk leisurely through

the open hall door and stand looking meditatively southward to where the ocean lay. He was evidently waiting for some one, and presently, as if tired of his inaction, he planted his forefeet firmly on the upper step, and drawing himself backwards gave himself a mighty shake.

A moment later a tall slight figure joined the dog, and stooping patted it fondly. The deerhound rose in answer to that loving greeting and placed its huge paws upon the girl's shoulders. Wriothesley could see it all as he approached through the shrubberies; the girlish form clothed in white, with the splendid brute standing upright, gazing rapturously into her face and wagging his tail. The whole scene might have been wrought in marble. The shrubs grew thicker there and he lost sight of the perfect picture, and when he emerged again into a larger light he was very close to the house. The girl was still there, however, with the dog now crouching at her feet. Wriothesley gazed at her intently. Could *that* be Marvel? the child he had left. How altogether changed, if she indeed it were. And what was it in her face that reminded him of—of whom? He could not remember.

She too had seen him; their eyes had met, and first she paled and then a sudden lovely crimson flew to her cheeks, and then, with a faint glad cry, she sprang down the steps and threw her arms around his neck:

"It is you. You have come at last. Oh, Fulke! Oh, dear, *dear* Fulke!"

She kissed him warmly, without a touch of bashfulness. Why should she be shy with him?—was he not her brother?

"And to think," she went on presently with a little tearful laugh, "that for quite a minute I did not know you. Oh! that was horrid of me. But come in—come at once. Auntie will be so glad, so happy."

"A moment," entreated Wriothesley. He held her gently by both arms and looked at her. This girl who had kissed him so frankly and now stood smiling straight into his eyes without a suspicion of embarrassment, verily, she was a revelation.

"So you are Marvel," he said at length. His tone was so

full of unfeigned amazement that she fairly bubbled over with mirth and gladness.

"I really believe you didn't know me either," she said "Yes, *haven't* I grown. Auntie says she will put a weight on my head if I go on doing it any more; and when I am just seventeen too. But don't let us stop talking here. Come in to Auntie; she has been—oh so longing for you."

She slipped her hand into his and dragged him eagerly up the steps and into the grand old hall. Through the dim beauty of it she hurried him, each moment her light step growing swifter until at last she began to run. Her excitement communicating itself to Wriothesley he too found himself running presently up the broad oaken staircase, along the waxed corridors. All the time he was tormented by a desire to know who it was she so much resembled. Where lay the resemblance? Was it in her eyes, her hair, her mouth? When they drew near the end of the corridor that led to Lady Mary's rooms—he, rather the worse for his rapid movement; she, fresh as a young fawn—as though she could no longer retain her joyful news she began to call aloud:

"I have found him, auntie! It is Fulke indeed. He is coming. I am bringing him to you."

Thus announced, and laughing gaily at her childish enthusiasm, he was ushered into Lady Mary's presence.

She was lying back in a large armchair, and he went to her quickly and knelt down beside her. When he saw her, he was thankful that nothing had had power to keep him from her—once duty had lifted its heavy finger—she was so frail, so ethereal, so close to the border-land. A lovely smile lay upon her lips, but it was a smile that awed him; frail indeed he knew was the thread that kept her soul from heaven.

"My darling!" she whispered. "My own boy!" She pressed his head down against her breast and ran her fingers with a lingering love through his short locks; two large tears fell down her cheeks.

"I was so afraid I should not wait to see you," she said; and then "it was such a long, long time." After a little while, however, the old cheefulness that had ever charac-

terized her came back with a rush, and having kissed him again she pushed him playfully from her.

"And now stand up, Wriothesley," she said, "and let me see how my boy looks as a man."

Wriothesley got on his feet, and with an affectation of showing himself off to the best advantage stood well back from her, folded his arms across his chest, and drew himself up to his full height, which was nothing off six feet. Lady Mary regarded with delight the tall, bronzed, handsome soldier before her, but the tall soldier himself felt that he was growing momentarily uneasy beneath the steady glance of two luminous eyes that did not belong to Lady Mary. The tall, white child; this strange, new Marvel; was staring at him openly, innocently.

"Auntie," said she suddenly. "How very brown he is."

"My dear," said Lady Mary in the exact tone one would use to a little girl of twelve, "It is not in good taste to speak to one person of another when that other happens to be present."

"I know. I should have remembered," said Marvel contritely. Then she corrected her breach of etiquette by looking sweetly at Wriothesley and saying to him direct:

"You are extremely brown."

"Well," said Lady Mary pleasantly. "What would you have, you silly child? The sun of India would not hide its face to please you and me."

"You quite misunderstand. I didn't want it to," said Marvel arching her brows. "I like him, that is, I mean I like *you*, Fulke, brown, like that; but what I wonder at, and what I find fault with, is that his neck below his collar is white. That spoils the effect. Why didn't you make yourself brown all over, Fulke?"

This was embarrassing. Both Lady Mary and Wriothesley, after a second's pause, laughed unrestrainedly, and Marvel smiled with them in sympathy as it were, though it was very evident that she didn't know why.

"I suppose it would be too much trouble," she said in the tone of one searching after truth.

"That was the reason," said Wriothesley. "That and one or two other absurd reasons hardly worth mentioning."

Then he turned to Lady Mary. "Don't imagine I haven't taken your lesson to heart," he said gaily. "But I must speak to you *of* Marvel, although she is present. How changed she is—how different in every way!"

"Yes. She persuaded me to let her put up her hair last month," returned Lady Mary with a rather troubled air, her eyes on Marvel. "*That* has made such a difference. And such a child as she is—it was too soon, I think."

"But seventeen, auntie! And so tall as I am. You know I told you how Miss Netterville laughed about it to her sister that Sunday. I heard the word 'tail' distinctly. You wouldn't like to hear your hair called a tail, Fulke, would you? And then, auntie, you remember what the rector said ——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Lady Mary. "We all know that what you say, the rector says. But, for my own part, I think it absurd for a little girl like you to ape the habits of grown up people."

Wriothesley listened to this with amazement mingled with amusement. It was plain to him that Lady Mary still regarded Marvel as quite a child, the child she had taken to her heart so many years ago and reared and loved, and that Marvel herself had not yet waked to the fact that her feet stood within that brook that divides the child from the woman. It all arose, no doubt, from the isolated life she had led, with only the loving companionship of one old woman and one old man to fill her days. There was some curiosity in the glance he now turned upon Marvel, and as he looked he told himself she was inexpressibly lovely, with that calm serenity that sat on lip and brow, and that spoke of utter and entire innocence and peace.

He felt it was all beautiful, but it did not touch him as it might have done had his heart been cleansed of the wild passion that was consuming it. He understood vaguely the purity that filled his home—the old woman making a joyful preparation for the life beyond the grave, the young girl standing on the threshold of this life, ignorant of evil, with large calm eyes soft with trust and dulled

by no suspicion. Yet, after the first joy at meeting again with her who had been more than mother to him had subsided, a sense of impatience grew on Wriothesley, and a longing to get back to her who held his heart in her cool, calculating hand.

His promise to return to her kept him alive. He got through his day and his evening in the old home very creditably, but all through the gentle babble of those two who had so longed for his return he heard that other low seductive voice, and felt the touch of the soft clinging fingers.

He made an excuse next morning, ran up to town, and arrived at Mrs. Scarlett's house in Park Lane only to find her surrounded by a fashionable crowd. She was in fact "at home," and he only managed to get a word or two from her, a glance, and a faint pressure from her hand. He returned to The Towers disappointed, yet in a degree satisfied in that he had at least seen her, and that her eyes had looked kindly into his.

After that visit he gave himself up for a whole week to the home life. He told himself he liked it, and he grew dreamy, idle, taking no notice of how the days went; one was so like the other, indeed, in that still calm household that hardly one knew if it were to-day or yesterday. On the seventh day Lady Mary sent him a message to say she would be glad to see him in her own room after luncheon, a meal she rarely attended. When he obeyed her summons he was surprised to find her alone; it was a most unusual thing, as Marvel was almost always in attendance on her.

"I want to speak to you," she said when he had seated himself beside her. "Don't be frightened, it is only a word or two I have to say, and it has nothing to do with that hateful thing, business. It is something, nevertheless, that lies heavy on my mind—the fear that my poor child will have too great cause to miss me when I go."

"You mean?" questioned he gravely.

"That I would have your *promise* to befriend her. I know your heart, Fulke—no kinder one could be—but young men, my darling," here she laid her pretty withered

hand on his as a little apology, "are sometimes careless, and you might not think always. But if you will give me your word to protect and cherish her I shall know she has no cause for fear when I am gone."

"Why should you talk like this? There may yet be many days before you."

"Not many. It is this troublesome heart of mine that warns me," said she, laying her hand upon it with a faint smile. "It is tired—fairly worn out—it fain would be at rest. It has found the day too long already—it is weary of sounding out the hours. Very gladly would it run down, and indeed I feel the final tick is at hand. We grow impatient for the calm of endless sleep, my heart and I. But Marvel, how will it be with her when that hour comes? There is only you, Wriothesley. You will accept this trust—you will be true to her?"

"Any request of yours, believe me, would be sacred to me," said Wriothesley earnestly. "But, even had you not spoken, I should have been faithful to the little friend of my boyhood. Rest assured Marvel shall always be as a sister to me."

"She is a sweet girl. Hers is a very lovely nature," said the old lady dreamily. "Wrapt in mystery as is her birth I should nevertheless esteem the man who wins her heart more than usually happy. That night, that storm—how it all rushes back upon me to-day! The charming, tearful face, the cry of rapture when she saw us, and the discovery of that locket. You remember it, Fulke? She wears it round her neck always. I have a foolish, romantic fancy that some day it will be the means of proving her parentage."

"But have you never feared," said Wriothesley in a low tone, "that such proving might be only to her sorrow?"

"Nay," said Lady Mary mournfully, "I would not willingly think that. And, even so, I would not take it on me to bid her destroy it. God grant it bring no evil to her, she is too young, too sweet, for such sore grief. Yet I confess at times my heart is heavy for her."

"Do you know," said Wriothesley smiling brightly, with a view to lifting these gloomy thoughts from her breast,

"you make me feel a little jealous of your Marvel? All your thoughts seem given to her. Is there not even one for me?"

"Thought, dear child, but no fear. There lies the difference between you. As a boy you were honest, true, kindhearted, why should I fear for the man? And as for this world's goods, one need wish you no more than you have. There is, therefore, nothing to dread for you save perhaps life's disappointments, that no man may elude: the failing of a friendship, the waking from a dream or two, the loss of earthly love."

Wriothesley dropped her hand abruptly and rose to his feet. Something in her last words—a touch of prophecy, unmeant by her, yet felt by him—smote on his heart. A sharp pang of agonized fear rushed through him.

"Oh, not that!" he cried to himself. "Wealth, fame, anything but that!"

He went over to the window and pressed his brow against the cool glass. In an instant he awoke from the lethargy that had bound him to the monotony of this quiet country life for seven long days. What an interminable time it seemed since last he had seen *her!* Seven days only, yet what an æon it seemed. Well, he would not add to it; he would see her again, now, at once, to-day. A mad desire to start took possession of him. He felt stifled down there in that pure, dull, exquisite country. Where she was, there only was life. He turned hurriedly to Lady Mary, who was leaning back in her chair looking pale and exhausted, and with her eyes fixed thoughtfully on space.

"I shall have to run up to town this evening," he said. "The next train leaves at six, I think."

"So soon, dear? And must you go again? It seems to me as though I had only just found you, and now to lose you again."

"But not for six years this time," returned he, endeavouring to speak lightly. "For a few hours only. If I do not return to-night I shall certainly be here in the morning."

"The morning." She looked at him wistfully. "I would you could have stayed with me," she said.

Her reproach was so gentle, her whole presence so frail, that remorse seized him. By a supreme effort he conquered himself so far as to tell her that if she so willed it he would put off his going till the morrow; but always sweetly unselfish, she now at the last denied herself. She would not, she said, have him disarrange his plans for the vagaries of an old woman; and, easily persuaded, he left her.

CHAPTER VI.

"The worst thing an old man can be is a lover."

. . . . . .

"What see you there
That hath so cowarded and chased your blood
Out of appearance?"

It was about half-past ten when he drove up to the door. He sprang from the hansom and knocked impatiently at the door.

"Mrs. Scarlett at home?" It was past the bounds of all probability that she *should* be, in the height of the season; yet in a vague unreasoning way he knew he should find her. He did not feel even passing surprise at the servant's answer:

"Yes, my lord." The man spoke with a certain hesitation, and as if there was more to add; but Wriothesley took no notice of this.

"Upstairs?"—he asked—"in the morning room?"

"Yes, my lord; but——"

Wriothesley motioned him to one side.

"You needn't announce me," he said, and before the man could remonstrate or explain he was halfway up the staircase. He went lightly, his heart, winged, seemed to have flown into his feet; he had his hand upon the door of the pretty room that Mrs. Scarlett so much affected before another could have mounted more than the first few steps of the stairs: and now he opened it, and entered.

Mrs. Scarlett was half sitting, half reclining, upon a

crimson lounge, and beside her, very close to her, on a low chair, sat the Duke of Dawtry.

A sudden chill fell on Wriothesley. There was really no reason for it. Why should not the duke make an evening call on Mrs. Scarlett; why should she not receive him? It was a simple, a very ordinary matter, and yet——! He advanced into the room with a more careful step than that with which he had run upstairs, and his face, in spite of himself, looked grave.

Mrs. Scarlett made a little clever movement that brought her into a more studied position than the one she had been using, and a swift change swept across her face. Was it surprise, or annoyance? Wriothesley could not decide which, it came and went so suddenly.

"You," she said sweetly, holding out to him a jewelled hand.

The two men saluted each other with cold courtesy. It was impossible not to see the duke's evident irritation at the interruption, even through the veneer of his breeding, which indeed was excellent, and Wriothesley only barely suppressed a frown. It was altogether a bad moment, but it passed, and found them conversing as amicably as though no unfriendly feelings filled their breasts.

After a rather short five minutes, the duke rose and made his *adieux*, lingering a little over Mrs. Scarlett's hand as he did so. Wriothesley could not avoid hearing that a few words passed between them. Then the door closed on the elder man, and the coast so far was clear. A rather prolonged silence followed his exit—a silence that Wriothesley made no effort to break. A sense of unreality was oppressing him, and his heart seemed on fire. Orthodox as he persuaded himself a few moments ago to consider his presence in this room, he was now tormented by the question, Why had that old man been there, and alone with her? When driving to her a while since through the lighted streets he had felt positively certain in some vague, unreasoning way that he should find her at home; yet now there seemed to him something sinister in the fact that she was so. That she, who so courted society and was so courted by it, should deliberately elect to set aside all

invitations for this evening was strange indeed. And that old time-worn *roué*——! He flushed crimson and turned abruptly towards her to find her gaze—a rather penetrating one—fixed on him.

As their eyes met her whole expression altered, and that pretty, sweet, swift smile of hers parted her lips.

"That you should have come here like this!" she said. "Without a word—a line! What a boy you are. Come nearer"—holding out to him a slim white hand—"and tell me how you knew I should be at home to-night."

"I knew nothing. I came here on the merest chance of finding you."

"Well, you were gratified."

"Hardly."

"What! You wanted more than that? Was not I alone then sufficient for you?"

"You *alone*—yes," he answered slowly.

She laughed, and leant back amongst her cushions; the soft light from one of the rose-shaded lamps fell on her face.

"Is that it?" she said. "So you would isolate me. A little selfish, isn't it? And as for that poor old duke, you flatter him indeed when you condescend to be jealous of him. He is very prosy, I grant you; but he so likes a gossip with a pretty woman who is good enough not to *show* she is bored, that when he called, by chance like yourself, to-night, I had not the heart to deny myself to him; though my Indian friends will lose a letter or two by it. You see I am not so selfish as you are."

She said all this very artlessly, and smiled again. She had slipped her hand into his whilst speaking, and now, as if unconsciously, she tightened her fingers round his, softly, bewitchingly. He turned more towards her, the angry flash was dying from his eyes, he was relenting, he was almost won; another effort and he would be hers again.

"A word!" said she in a gay little whisper, leaning towards him. "You won't betray me? Well, I am not so unselfish perhaps as I would show myself. That old man is useful to me in many small ways; it may be that that

fact enables me to endure his prosings with the fortitude I do."

"It is nothing more than that?" asked Wriothesley. "You swear to me it is only that?"

"By what shall I swear? By my troth, or my halidom, whatever that may be? Dear Wriothesley, I am afraid the little *ingénue* has been teaching you naughty ways."

He knelt down beside her and laid her palm against his lips.

"My beloved!" he said, "tell me again that the Duke of Dawtry is nothing to you."

"Pouf! less than nothing. A summer wind could scatter my regard for him—so," making a dainty pretence of blowing something away from the tips of her fingers. "Fossils, I would have you know, however priceless, are not much in my line. I think"—with a reproachful glance at him—"you might have known that. They do not commend themselves to me; they fail to enchain my fancy."

"*Your* fancy! That is a thing light as air. Oh! that *I* might enchain it."

"Why, so you do," said she. Her voice fell to a soft undertone. "Do you think I would let another kneel where you are kneeling now? Is it a small privilege, think you, to be allowed to——." She bent her head, and Wriothesley's lips met hers in a passionate embrace. After a long pause:

"That little girl has not won you from me then," she went on in a low wooing whisper. "You are still mine?"

"Now as ever."

"It is a love worth having," she said as if to herself. Her tone was subdued as of one musing. "I do believe you," she went on presently; "and yet, a *young* girl, Wriothesley: there is a great charm in youth, and that little thing is, I hear, lovely."

"Who told you that?"

"Your cousin—Mrs. Verulam. Her feeling towards me can hardly be called love, and she thought to amuse herself by telling me that yesterday. She is not after all as clever as she looks. She told me Miss—Craven is it you

call her?—was sufficiently out of the common to bring all London to her feet."

"I don't know, I'm sure. To me she seemed a pretty child, no more, no less. How you dwell upon her!" He spoke impatiently. "She is a mere baby—beautiful possibly, but uninteresting. Dismiss her from your mind."

"That I cannot. Regard it as absurd if you will, but I have thought of nothing but her all day."

"How could you think all day of one so entirely a stranger to you?

"She will not be always that. Some day I shall meet the child whom you call Marvel—and don't ask how because I don't know myself—but I feel that she will bear a direct influence upon my life. Will she make it, or mar it? that is what lies hidden from me." She sighed quickly.

"Willingly, I am sure she would injure no one," said Wriothesley thoughtfully.

She cast a swift sidelong glance at him from under her long lashes.

"Already she has found grace in your sight," she said. "The spell begins to work, you see. I tell you that girl will have much to do with your life and mine."

"Naturally," said Wriothesley gravely. "A child like that, cast so strangely into our family, must always be regarded by me as a sacred charge. So much I have promised Lady Mary, although, indeed, as I told her, such a promise was unnecessary. And as—" regarding her earnestly—"I hope your life will be closely interwoven with mine—it is probable that, as you say, she——"

Mrs. Scarlett put all that aside with a movement of her fan.

"You are going too wide of the mark," she said. "I am talking of that girl's influence over my destiny. Some warning tells me it will not be a beneficent one."

"Have you been consulting the spirits again? How many *séances* have you been attending this week?" questioned Wriothesley laughing. "You seem to have my aunt's little friend on the brain. Come, tell me why you think so much of her."

A fond hope that she was growing jealous of Marvel was

making his heart glad; but this illusion Mrs. Scarlett ruthlessly dispelled.

"Last night I dreamt of her," she said slowly. "A vision rather than a dream it was. There was no leading up to it, no beginning, no end. All suddenly, as it were, I found myself in the midst of a terrible darkness, a very blackness of night. There were mutterings and hoarse cryings all around, and sounds of trouble and woe. And then, even as I gazed affrighted into this impenetrable shade, lo! it parted, as though two sable curtains had been pulled aside, and there appeared a vague tremulous glimmer of light, opaque, silvery, that grew and grew, until almost it was too bright to look upon. It formed itself into a complete oval, a perfect frame, and in it stood a radiant figure, a tall slender creature, half child, half girl, with soft floating locks and gleaming innocent eyes, and a face that was purity embodied. Long I thought I gazed on it. There it stood immovable, smiling tranquilly, though surrounded by the awful darkness that held *me;* standing out from the hideous gloom with an insolence of youth and innocence that held me even whilst I *hated* it! The cries and the mutterings did not touch *her.* The gloom awoke in her no fear. The calm serenity never left the perfect face. I see it now," said she in a low condensed tone, rising slowly to her feet and gazing straight before her. "The face beautiful, angelic, and yet so like—like ——" She broke off shuddering, a sharp shiver ran through her frame; her face grew ghastly. "Great Heaven! what a thought!" she gasped, and tottered and would have fallen but that Wriothesley caught her.

"Like whom?" he asked.

"One dead. Dead and forgotten," she said faintly.

He soothed her tenderly, and after a little while she shook off the feverish horror that had seized her, and even laughed aloud at the absurd scene she had made him.

"But I hate to dream," she said, "it spoils a good night, and my nerves, though they tell me I am made of steel, are more troublesome than I care to say. Only to you," with a gentle glance, "I betray myself."

"All that you say only makes me love you the more,"

said Wriothesley. "And you, do you too love me?" It was not an assertion, it was an anxious question.

"Have you no faith?"

"A great deal, but yet I would have you say it."

"Yet what are words?"

"True," cried he springing to his feet. "Give me then proof."

She knew what this would lead to and tried to parry it.

"Have I not?" she said.

"Sweet proof indeed; but I would have more—*all*. Leonie, tell me you will marry me."

"If I did should I be wise for either you or me? Does marriage mean happiness or misery? That is a question that still puzzles the world, after centuries of honest trial."

"It does not puzzle me. If you love me, say you will be my wife."

"Are we not very well as we are? Why will you tempt Fate further? As for me," she threw a charming seriousness into her tone, "I dread to lose my lover."

"It would be rather to gain one for ever."

"Oh, no!" she shook her head. "A lover is one thing, a husband quite another. Once I was yours, half my value would be gone in your sight."

"You trifle with me," he said impatiently. His brow darkened, and she saw at once (for she was quick to see) that his mood was not one that would admit of further dallying. "I cannot say to you, take time to think this over, for you have had plenty of time in which to weigh me and find me wanting or otherwise, as the case may be. Give me, then, my answer now."

She rose slowly to her feet and stood back from him; a curious expression came into her eyes.

"You command," she said coldly.

"I entreat, I implore," returned he vehemently. "Leonie, answer me."

"I might indeed do that," said she with her flickering smile. "But would that answer please you? No, in spite of all you have said, I demand yet a little more time."

"At least, put a limit to my probation?"

She paused and looked down. Her fertile mind ran through the chances for and against the ambitious design on which she had set her heart, and decided, hurriedly, that she might safely promise to give Wriothesley his answer in a week. She could so arrange that the duke should within that time declare himself one way or the other; as her suitor openly accepted, or as the mere admirer of a fashionable beauty. In a week, then, she should be either an embryo duchess, or (a very bearable alternative) the affianced of an earl. In the brief minute in which she held silence, she carefully balanced the strawberry leaves together with the miserable old life attached to them, with the fresh, ardent, honest love standing there before her, and mercilessly decided in favour of the former.

"Come to me this day week," she said, "then I shall know."

"It seems a long time to make up your mind about me," said he wistfully, "still—as you will."

"And now, good-night, you have startled me more than you know. I want to be alone, to think it all over." She held out to him her hand.

"I know what your answer will be," he whispered with all a lover's fond trust. The certainty in his tone did not anger her—it only hurt her for the moment like the thrust of a sharp knife. "Why, then, will you condemn me to this seven days' misery? why not make me happy now?"

"You assume a great deal," she said playfully, "yet you must remember I have promised nothing."

"Yet I trust—I believe in you," replied he with passionate earnestness; "those last words I leave with you. Good-night, my love; good-night."

She sat there long after he was gone, deliberately making out a programme for the coming week—that should bring the duke finally to her feet. At length the weary drooping of her eyelids warned her that the night was far advanced, and that sleep was taking her into his welcome custody. She rose and stretched her long white arms, and a sigh of weariness escaped her. Yes, the whole evening had been a failure; it had been singularly fatiguing; she would go to bed.

There was one thing, however, she should do first. She rang the bell sharply, and dismissed from her service the footman who had admitted Wriothesley.

CHAPTER VII.

"Virtue alone has majesty in death."

. . . . . .

"That eating canker, grief, with wasteful spite
Preys on the rosy bloom of youth and beauty."

THE man who woke Wriothesley at his club next morning brought him a telegram. He opened it idly, in a dilatory fashion, feeling no apprehension about its contents, but as he read it the colour forsook his face. It was from the housekeeper at The Towers, and it told him that Lady Mary was dead. She had died quite suddenly the night before. There was nothing more in it, the message was as brief as it was terrible.

It was such a shock to Wriothesley that at first he felt stunned. Then he sprang out of bed and began with eager haste to dress himself. All through the time this took him, he was tormented by a sense of poignant regret that mingled with his grief and was even stronger than it. Why had he not stayed with her last night—her last night indeed? He remembered each word she had said, he saw again her kind old eyes as they rested lovingly upon him, he heard the gentle tone in which she expressed her sorrow that he should leave her then, and he recalled how sweetly she had refused to accept his offer to remain.

A little spark of comfort lay in the remembrance that he *had* offered, and that he would have stayed had she pressed the point; but then he knew he should not have left the decision with her.

The next train was due in half-an-hour. He gave no thought to breakfast, but rushed off to the station, caught the train just as it was slowly steaming out of it, and in about three hours found himself at The Towers. The hall

door was wide open, and he entered the house with a hesitating step. There was no sound of a footfall anywhere, no touch of life. A melancholy silence lay on everything. "Death, the all eloquent," alone spoke.

As he paused, half doubting where to go or what to do, a slender figure emerged from the library on his right and came towards him through the dim religious light of the grand old hall, with dejected steps. It was Marvel—but what a changed Marvel! The happy childish smile was gone, the mobile mouth was given up to melancholy. Grief lay beneath the lids that were downcast, as if to hide the misery of the all-sorrowing eyes. She came to him like a little wounded bird, and crept into his arms, and laid her cheek against his.

"When was it?" he asked presently, with a heavy heart.

"Last night; quite early; we think she must have—left us—in her sleep." She spoke with deep dejection: there was indeed a despair in the young voice too great for tears to give relief. "You will like to see her," she said.

Wriothesley bowed his head, and once again they ascended the staircase together. Now, with lagging steps and saddened mien she went, holding his hand tightly, as though she feared to lose him too, and with a thrill of emotion he recalled that other day when like a fawn she had sprung from step to step, and, laughing gaily, had conducted him to her who never more would welcome them in this life.

In the chamber of death all was exquisitely sweet and fresh. Great bunches of delicately-perfumed flowers lay on all the tables, and roses freshly cut were strewn upon the bed, not profusely, but one here and there. In her life she had loved her roses well.

Wriothesley knelt by the bed and buried his face in his hands, but Marvel went up to the still figure and bending over it gazed long and lovingly upon the peaceful features, that looked as though they were but sunk in a calm slumber. Thus had she gone from them, without a sigh or a struggle:

"A death-like sleep,
A gentle wafting to immortal life;"

such had been her ending; a fit one truly for a lovely life like hers.

"Sure, 'tis a serious thing to die, my soul!" but looking on Lady Mary's face, half the terrors of it seemed to fade. It was very happy, and younger—far younger—than Marvel could ever remember it. "All people," says Jeremy Collier, "are young in the other world," and truly it seemed as if Lady Mary had already entered into her heritage of eternal youth.

Marvel stood watching her with thoughtful eyes. There was no dismay, no fear in them, rather a great comfort. If she could only be beside her thus always, if she could always have her body near, even though the soul were absent, it would not be so hard to bear—the cruel sense of loneliness would be less acute. She felt soothed by the divine majesty of death, but when Wriothesley arose and took her hand and led her from the room, the expression of comfort died from her face, giving place once more to one of unassuageable grief.

The mournful day passed slowly; a brilliant day, warm with sunshine and glad with the songs of many birds; a very *living* day, that spoke to them of that glorious eternal life beyond the grave, to which our brief existence here is but as an hour.

Although it was seven o'clock, the June sun was still hot in the heavens as Wriothesley with a grave face traversed the gardens. Some one had told him Marvel had gone out alone into that smaller rose garden that had been her auntie's special care. Poor lonely child! A great compassion for her led him to follow her footsteps, and presently he found her, standing forlorn, miserable, in the centre of the green sward where stood a fountain whose waters played upon and helped to clothe a laughing naiad. She was dressed in a simple little white frock (such as Lady Mary had loved to clothe her in) that reached her throat, but left her arms bare to the shoulder. With a sad desire to put on mourning of some sort, she had found a wide black sash and had wound it round her slim young waist.

She was standing, mute and miserable, with her arms hanging loosely before her, the hands clasped, as Wriothes-

ley came up. They were long arms, and slender as a child's, but he could not help noticing how exquisitely they were moulded and how dazzlingly white their colour. He was anxious to say something that should rouse her from the stupor of grief into which she seemed sunk, but his imagination played him false just then and no satisfactory commonplace remark occurred to him. At last a happy thought struck him: he would appeal to her vanity—all women were vain.

"Marvel!" he said gently. At the sound of his voice she started perceptibly: she had been so lost in her meditations as to have been deaf to his approach, but she now looked at him. "My dear child!" he went on; "don't you think your arms will get sunburnt if you stand there with them thus uncovered."

This brilliant essay did not meet with the success it deserved; she glanced first at him with indignant reproach, then down at the arms in question, and then again at him, this time piteously.

"And if they do," she said, "what does it matter? There is no one now to see them—no one!" She threw her hands abroad with a little desolate air that went to his heart.

"Don't say that," he entreated earnestly; "am *I* no one?"

"Oh yes," she said, her eyes filling with tears, "no one at all."

"At least I am your friend," he persisted, though rather taken aback, "and surely friendship should count with you. And," gravely, "do you think *she* would like you to be careless, just because she was not here to see?"

In a vague way it occurred to him that he too was treating her as a child, and the thought puzzled him. Yet how else was he to treat her. Those large solemn eyes were still within the realms of childhood; the whole face, that was lovely as a dream, held not one secret. She seemed impressed by his words, and glad that he had touched her in some way for her good, he was about to continue in the same strain when she interrupted him.

"Ah! but that is it," she said, "that is what hurts me.

I do not know now whether she cares at all. She is gone from me."

"But is she so altogether gone from us," argued he gently. "Would it not be a happier thing, Marvel, for you and me to try to think of her as though she had not entirely left us, but that her presence still dwelt in the old house she loved so well."

She was looking at him very seriously as he finished. He could see the idea soothed and pleased her.

"And again," he went on, "you must not think that with her went all the love in your life. There is the rector, a real friend, you have not forgotten him, have you? And, besides, there is a still older friend who cares very much for you, and who will always grieve with your unhappiness and sympathize with your joys."

Her eyes searched his anxiously.

"Is it you?" she asked. "Oh! if you could only love me. If you were given to me to fill her place. But no," despondently, "it could never be the same." She broke down and covered her face with her hands.

Wriothesley drew her gently towards him, and with a sob she laid her head against him, and with all the abandonment of a child threw one arm over his shoulder. She was crying softly but bitterly, and Wriothesley scarcely knew what to say to comfort her. He smoothed back her hair, which was unbound and hung in loose rippling masses to her waist, and waited in patience until she should have recovered herself.

"You, too, will go!" she said at last. "Every one goes. I shall always be alone."

"I am not going," declared he cheerfully. "I shall send in my papers and resign my commission at once. I am tired of barrack life, and indeed, such a passion for home has grown upon me that I shall probably be always somewhere that will enable me to get to you just whenever you choose. Now, that doesn't sound like being alone, does it? And, do you know, I don't like being alone either, so I want you to come in and have dinner with me, and how can you do that if you keep on crying so. And why is your pretty hair all loose like this?"

"She liked it so," mournfully. "Oh, how sorry I am now that I ever teased her about letting me twist it round my head. What did it matter if all the horrid girls in the world called it a tail, if it pleased her. How selfish," vehemently, "how unkind of me!"

"Nonsense! It was the most natural thing in the world. And as for your auntie, I firmly believe she agreed with you about it in the end. What is the good of having a head so charmingly classic as yours if you don't show it? I am sure if she could see you now she would not admire your hair like that, and certainly I do not; and as I am your guardian now, I hope you will try to be as good to me as you were to her."

"My guardian! You? Are *you*—" repeating herself in her astonishment—"my guardian? Are you, really?" She seemed lost in wonder. And then, "Was it her wish?"

"Almost her last."

"Oh! I am glad of that! Thankful and glad. How she thought of everything that would please me!" with a profound sigh. "Then now you can't go away from me," she cried, and laid her other arm round his neck and kissed his cheek. "You will never leave me. I shall always be with you as I was with her."

She seemed so overjoyed at this thought that he had not the heart just then to dispel a dream that was evidently so full of sweetness to her, but he persuaded her to come in to dinner with him, and made her sit next to him, and coaxed her to eat one or two things, bidding the men place the *entrées* on the corner of the table near him, until he should have helped her with his own hands.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Then said this lady with her maiden mouth,
Shame-faced, and something paler in the cheek."

THE last sad formalities had come to an end. The body was consigned to the family vault. Once again all the

windows at The Towers were flung wide open, and the merry, dancing summer sunshine streamed into, and lit up the rooms that never again would know the gentle presence of Lady Mary Craven.

Marvel went dreamily about all day, wandering from place to place, visiting the favourite haunts and living over again the happy tranquil hours she had spent with her first and best friend. Once or twice she walked sadly down to the rectory, and sat there hand in hand with the rector, who truly mourned with her for one whose loss seemed to him irreparable. Fulke, who should have been a companion to her—now that the first severe strain was lifted, and Lady Mary's death had grown to be a thing realized—was so filled with a nervous longing for the moment that should permit him again to seek the presence of Mrs. Scarlett and hear from her lips his fate, that he was practically useless.

He grew silent, almost irritable. It angered him that he could not endure the suspense with greater calmness, but he could not. He told himself, and indeed he *was* absolutely certain, that he had but to wait for the day named by her, to learn that his beloved was really his, but it was so *hard* to wait. The hours were leaden, the days intolerably long; he fretted and fumed secretly, but when at last the morning dawned that permitted him to seek her, a great peace, a sense of rest perfected fell on him. It was the last he was to know for many a day!

Marvel and he breakfasted together, and he told her that he should be obliged to leave her and go up to town for the day.

"In all probability I shall not return until to-morrow," he said. Fond visions of spending the evening with Leonie floated before him as he spoke. An evening with her as her affianced husband, as the one she held dearest on earth —as he held her. "But you must not be lonely. You must not let one of your sad little fits of depression take possession of you in my absence. It is for the day only, remember, and the hours will be short." Too short, he thought.

"Oh! so long," corrected she. He had induced her to take the head of the table, and now she was pouring out

his coffee for him in a nervous, childish fashion. As she spoke she looked sorrowfully at him.

"Why are you going?" she asked.

"Business," promptly.

"I wish I could go with you. I suppose," with hopeful doubt, "I couldn't?"

"My dear girl, no. And you wouldn't like it if you could."

"Oh! If I should be in the way!" said she.

"It isn't that. But just fancy how dull you would find it all by yourself in an hotel. I should be too occupied to take you about and amuse you."

"I shouldn't mind that. And as to being dull in an hotel, I shouldn't, indeed. I was never in one, and I could walk about it all day, and examine it, and peep into the rooms, and enjoy myself very well—that is, as well as I could without you."

"You couldn't do anything of the kind," said Wriothesley, divided between a desire to laugh and to enlarge her mind on the subject. "Young ladies can't walk about hotels or peep into rooms that belong to other people without being considered at *least* peculiar. You don't want to be considered peculiar, do you?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Marvel, who was plainly too disappointed to be argued with effectually. "I suppose I could stay in my *own* room at all events," she said presently, as though indignantly defying the hotel people to turn her out of that at all events. "And afterwards, when your business was over, you would come back—and——"

"My business will take up all my time—and—in fact, I can't take you," said he with some impatience.

She put down the toast she had been eating, and two large tears gathering in her eyes fell down her cheeks.

"What's the matter now?" demanded he in despair.

"It isn't true," she sobbed angrily from behind her black-bordered handkerchief. "You said you would be the same to me as auntie was; and—and there isn't a word of truth in it. *She* wouldn't have left me behind. She would have taken me with her wherever she went."

"Can't you understand, Marvel, that there may be reasons

why I cannot," he said. To talk to her about such things as propriety or *les convenances* seemed to him a hopeless task, and one that might be prolonged for an eternity. No child bred within the four walls of a convent was ever so unsophisticated as she. He was not altogether sure that Lady Mary's training had been a judicious one, as he sat there, feeling how impossible it was to put the case clearly before her. At all events, it was a very troublesome training, for those who came after. And yet, if troublesome, how sweet! Through all, he acknowledged that.

"Do try to understand that," he said.

"Well, I will," tearfully and with an effort; then, "Will you be back soon?"

"Yes. Soon, I hope."

"But at once, I mean," eagerly, and with a beseeching look at him from behind the urn. "By the very *first* train in the morning."

"Well, no; not by the first train, that goes at about 3 a.m. And, perhaps—I think it better to tell you, Marvel, because disappointment would be worse to you—I think there is a possibility that I may not be able to return until the day after to-morrow." He spoke quite steadily, telling what he believed to be the truth, more for her sake than his own, and rather against his will, as he feared another outburst of grief when she should hear it. But he was mistaken. She made so sign of being sunk in deeper depths of woe, save a small sigh of resignation. Her crestfallen air incensed him. Good heavens, what *was* it she expected!

"My dear child," he said raising his brows, "you didn't suppose I was going to spend the rest of my natural life here, did you, walking up and down the garden path?"

"No," forlornly. "But—how I wish you *would!*" She said it with such heartfelt longing that, after a struggle with his better feelings, he burst out laughing. He laughed long and heartily in spite of his desire to suppress himself, whilst Marvel sat opposite and stared at him. He could see that she was distinctly offended, though she sought hard to conceal that fact and quite believed she had effectually done so when she had asked him, in what she fondly, but

erroneously, supposed to be her natural tone, to have some more coffee. It was bathos upon pathos! He repressed himself then and said, "No, thank you," with such a contrite air that she relented, and finally made it up with him by coming from behind the ponderous urn and slipping into a chair close to his elbow. Thus placed, she made an excellent breakfast, and was rather more cheerful than he had seen her since her auntie's death.

She walked down to the gate with him presently, past the flowering rhododendrons and through the sweet avenue of limes, the dogcart having been sent on before at her particular request. During that hateful minute when he had laughed at her she had made up her mind not to be dismal again, at least, before him, and she chattered incessantly all down the drive, throwing in even a laugh here and there to show him how gay she was, until the tall iron gates were in view. They were open, and the dogcart stood outside, a little turned up the road, so that it and the groom were not to be seen. She felt that she could go no farther and stopped short. All at once her courage forsook her, and finally she took leave of him as if he were going to New Zealand.

"It will be a terrible time," she said; "a sort of a small year, but I shall try not to mind it *much*."

"And if I should not return the day after to-morrow," he ventured in a rather nervous tone. He felt he was growing quite afraid of her. "There is a bare possibility; that is,—*perhaps* I may be detained."

He paused, wondering how she would take this, and was at last quite surprised by her manner of acceptance. It was altogether so different from what he had expected.

"You won't," she said confidently. "You said 'perhaps' to it, and that always means a doubt, and I know things could not happen so unkindly as to keep you away longer than the day after to-morrow." She clung to the words he himself had used.

"What shall I bring you from town," he asked laughing, "a doll?"

"Nonsense! Don't you see that I'm grown up. Now

go—go quickly;" giving him a little push, "the sooner you go, the sooner you will come back to me."

The horse was growing restive, and had now backed into full view of the two standing in the avenue. Wriothesley jumped into the cart and gathered up the reins, and Marvel turned disconsolately away and went towards the house. Wriothesley cast a glance at her and saw she had come to a standstill and that her eyes were full of tears. He waved an adieu to her which she returned, and then walked quickly away. Poor little lonely girl! Through his heart there rushed a pang of sincerest pity for her.

All through his drive to the station his mind was more or less occupied by her, and he came to the conclusion that it was a distinctly troublesome, if very sweet, legacy, that Lady Mary had left him. What a dear little thing she was, but how impracticable. What on earth was he to do with her? His marriage with Leonie would not in all probability come off for some time, and meanwhile where was Marvel to be placed. She was too old for school, unfortunately, but not old enough to live on with him at The Towers without unkind comment from the world. He might, of course, give up The Towers to her, but that too would create attention, and already Leonie's mind was strangely exercised about her. A bright thought struck him. He would consult Leonie on the matter. And perhaps, she was so charming, she would arrange for Marvel to stay with her until by their marriage they should make a settled home for her. He dwelt on this all the way to town, and only lost sight of it as he drew near Mrs. Scarlett's house in Park Lane. Then a sense of nervous happiness took possession of him, blotting out all lesser thoughts. It seemed to him that he could see her awaiting him, with softened eyes and hands outstretched, and a little tremulous murmur of words sweet and loving. Her face rose before him, unusual in its loveliness, and therefore to be prized the more:

> "Nought under heaven so strongly doth allure,
> The sence of man and all his minde possese,
> As beautie's lovely baite."

His mind was fixed on her, and a very rapture of joy

filled him as he told himself that never man yet was surer of being loved in kind than he was—unworthy though he must be deemed!

CHAPTER IX.

"O, all fair lovers about the world,
There is none of you, none, that shall comfort me.
My thoughts are as dead things, wrecked and whirled
Round and round in a gulf of the sea;
* * * * *
The bright fine lips so cruelly curled."

MRS. SCARLETT was alone. She was very simply, but very exquisitely and expensively dressed, and she was as calm and softly smiling as though love's tumults were unknown to her. Perhaps they were. She rose as Wriothesley entered, and greeted him with precisely the proper amount of gravity suitable to an occasion where a young man had lost his mother, for Lady Mary, she knew, had been quite that to him.

"I have so wondered when you would come," she said. He looked at her quickly. When he should come? How strange her tone was! Had she *forgotten!* Oh, no, *no*, that was impossible. "Did you get my note? No? Oh! I am so sorry about that. You must have thought me so cold, so unfeeling; but nowadays——; don't you think the postal arrangements are very defective? I wish you had had that note; but even without it, dear Wriothesley, you know you had all through my sincerest sympathy."

"Did you think I ought to have come?" said he, clinging in a dull sort of way to her first sentence. Perhaps he had offended her by obliging her too closely and keeping away until the day named. He hoped so, with a passion of which he himself was hardly aware. He had heard nothing more that she had said, but only those first words.

"Oh no. Under the circumstances, I could not have expected, or desired, that you should call. I hope I am too much your friend not to know when to efface myself."

She smiled, her brilliant rapid smile. "Indeed I did not dare to think I should have the pleasure of seeing you again for quite a long time to come. But you have been very good to me. Do you know—" leaning towards him—"the very last thing I expected was to see you to-day."

What did it all mean? Why did she speak to him like that? His *friend!* How strange it all was! He felt dazed and confused, and a surging sound came into his ears and tormented him. "The very last thing she had expected." Then the surging sound died away from him, and he found himself quite calm, and cold. She was still talking in her soft *traînante* voice, that was so subtly sweet.

"Though personally unknown to me, I feel from all I have heard that Lady Mary Craven was a friend not to be replaced."

This tribute was very gracefully uttered, but Wriothesley could find no words to reply to it. He wished vaguely that she would not speak about that good dead woman, yet he did not know at the moment why he wished it. He was occupied with this curious change in her, that he could not fathom.

"You are right," he said gravely; "Lady Mary's was a singularly perfect nature."

"All her acquaintances say that. And the little girl—the *protégée*—what of her?"

She spoke more rapidly than was her wont, as though she feared a silence, and he felt that she was warding him off, and unconsciously his manner became colder towards her.

"That is a matter that has been troubling me," he said; "she is such a child that it is impossible to make her understand certain things. Yet, of course, she cannot go on living at The Towers in the old way. I hardly know what to do with her."

"Why, marry her, of course," said Mrs. Scarlett laughing. "That is the best and readiest way to solve such a problem as that."

"You are jesting, of course?" he said very slowly.

"Indeed not. Why should you think so? If all that

we outsiders hear is true, she was well named Marvel by you. She is a very vision of loveliness, is she not? Why, how conscious you look! I do believe that that marriage scheme has already suggested itself to you."

"Your usual clear-sightedness is at fault there," said Wriothesley with a pale smile. "The only thing that has suggested itself to me in that line has been my marriage with yourself."

"Ah! by-the-by, as to that," she said, as if suddenly remembering something of trivial importance, "I have been thinking it over, and I have come to the conclusion that it wouldn't do. It wouldn't do at all! Was this the day I told you to call? But of course! how stupid of me to let it slip my memory. "Well"—smiling—"you have had an escape. Much reflection has revealed to me the fact that you were born for a better woman than I am."

Wriothesley was staring at her, pale and very still. She cast a swift glance at him, and saw something in his eyes that so far affected her that she did not care, or else feared, to look again.

"You don't mean a word of all that," he said at last, with suppressed violence in his tone. "You shan't mean it! Do you hear?"

"Perfectly!" She made an attempt at laughter. "But, after all, I do mean it."

"You *do!* You dare to say that to me!—that you mean it—after all. Do you remember that——"

"That I made you no promise," interrupted she hurriedly. She shut up her fan with an impatient click and threw it from her. "I hope you are not going to be unreasonable," she said. "I do hope you are not going to make me a scene."

"Is that all? Is that the end of it? I am to be reasonable and not to make you uncomfortable by telling you a few home truths. Is that what I came here to-day to hear?" Then his voice changed and grew quiet but harsh. "What has happened?" he said. "Who is it?"

She waived the question:

"I said I should have time," she explained, speaking quickly. "I asked for a week, and now at the end of it I

beg to decline the honour you would do me. There is nothing in all that to reproach me with."

The blood seemed to rush in a torrent to his heart, and then flowed back again, leaving him pulseless and chilled as marble. Again that odd surging sound beat on his brain, and his lips felt parched and dry.

"Something has happened," he persisted. "What is it? I do not entreat you to change your mind about all this; but I must know——"

"If you really expected a different answer, I can only say"—icily—"that I deeply regret it."

"Do you? That is very good of you. It is more than one should hope for, that you should feel regret for—— Great Heaven!" he burst out with a passion that shook her, hard as she was, "to think that the earth should hold such women as you! You, who have lain in my arms and let me kiss you, and have kissed me back again; who have fooled me to the top of your bent, only to feel regret for the victim when the moment comes to cast him aside."

She looked at him through half-closed lids.

"I am not fond of amateur performances," said she with a curl of her lip. "And to remind me of—of anything that may have occurred between us is hardly what I should have accused you of. May I be permitted to say that it is scarcely in good taste? However, I am grateful to you for this revelation—this glimpse into your inner self—as it has helped me to kill that regret to which you so vehemently object."

"Who is it?" demanded he again abruptly. Her insolent scorn had not touched him. He thought only of an answer to this question that should tell him all. She regarded him steadily for a moment.

"I think there had better be an end of this," she said.

"So there shall be when I know who has taken my place."

"Your place? What place? What is it you mean?"

"I mean to know the name of the man you intend to marry before I leave this house," retorted he doggedly.

His tone angered her even more than his persistence.

"Know it then!" she cried, flashing round at him—"The Duke of Dawtry!"

Wriothesley started as if shot. He grew deadly pale, and such a strange light grew within his eyes that for the moment she was frightened; then it all passed away, and suddenly he was upon his knees before her, clasping her gown. The perfume of violets came to him as he knelt there—(those flowers that she always wore)—and seemed to enfold him in a dull, misty sweetness.

"My darling, not that," he cried wildly, "not that old man! Oh, the shame, the horror of it! Leonie! listen to me—be patient. You think that rank, money, those tawdry benefits that he can bestow on you, will suffice you, will make you happy. I tell you, no. Hear me before it is too late. Is love—such love as I can offer—my whole heart and life, as nothing to you when compared with——" He would have gone on, but something in her face checked him. She lay back in her chair and laughed aloud. It was a clear ringing laugh, not forced or strained, but free and replete with amusement. She drew her gown from his fingers, and motioned to him to rise.

"You think a good deal of that love of yours," she said mockingly—"certainly more than I do!"

That sobered him. He rose to his feet, pale still, but quite composed.

"Are you going?" she said. "It is a pity our friendship should end like this, but it is your own fault. As I told you," shrugging her shoulders, "you are not reasonable. You believed—— I don't know," petulantly, "what you believed."

"I believed myself your lover," replied he steadily. "I believed that as such I was regarded by you."

"If you did, you have only yourself to blame." Again that quick anger flamed into her eyes. How did he dare to stand there and coldly condemn her! "But *if* you did, there is still one thing left for me to do."

She swept out of the room into the boudoir beyond, and presently returning, flung upon a table before him a mass of glittering gems—rings, bracelets, necklets, and such-like baubles.

"Will you take them with you, or shall I send them?" she said.

It was all so horrible, so unexpected, so second-rate, that for a while Wriothesley stood there motionless, as one stunned and unable to realize. Then, still a little unconsciously, he took up his hat, bowed to her, and left the room.

CHAPTER X.

"Give me a look, give me a face,
That makes simplicity a grace."

* * * *

"Beneath her eyelids deep,
Love lying, seems asleep,
Love swift to wake, to weep,
To laugh, to gaze."

THE air outside beat on his forehead and in a measure revived him. He understood, at last, though as yet vaguely, that his idol had fallen from its pedestal, that it had been smashed, and that what he had deemed gold unalloyed had been after all only vilest clay. He sauntered on, not heeding the crowd as it went by him, and finally he turned into St. James' Park, and there gave himself up a prey to the bitter waking recollections of a sweet dead dream.

Well! it was all over. He had thought himself young a while ago. How long ago? Only this morning. And now he knew that he was old. For what are years? Not they but the cruel disappointments of life kill youth. And who could have thought she would have been like that? So cold, so bloodless, so cruel! All at once a great contempt for her awoke in his mind. He left the park and bent his steps towards his club. In Pall Mall he met a man he knew, and stayed to speak to him for a moment or two. It was the usual thing, Mr. Gladstone's last speech, the touch of irritability he had shown in the House last night. He felt impatient, and with a quick word parted from his friend and crossed the street.

In his club he settled down into a chair, and taking up *The Times* affected to busy himself in its contents. He saw nothing more than the fact that so many columns went to the sheet, but it sufficed him. He hardly cared to know what the debate was about last night. He could see nothing but her mocking face as she laughed at his love, and drew back disdainfully her skirts from his grasp. Even then he had seen how beautiful she was through the treachery that enfolded her.

> "Was ever book, containing such vile matter,
> So fairly bound? O, that deceit should dwell
> In such a gorgeous palace!"

Some men strolled into the room and one accosted him. "Puzzling over that Irish question?" asked he, leaning over the top of the paper to say it. "Give it up if you don't want your brain to turn. Blake came from Ireland last night and says the Kerry boys have made up their minds to crush England. The Horse Guards, I hear, are in an awful pucker, and the Admiralty have issued orders to man the fleet."

Wriothesley managed to smile at this facetious person, and then throwing the paper aside left the room. He could not stay there without having to listen and make replies, and that was beyond him just then. He was a popular man, people were always glad to see him, but he felt he could not be sociable to-day.

It was close on evening as he left the club. He walked on aimlessly until he came to Waterloo Place, at the corner of which a carriage passed him. He lifted his eyes mechanically to look at its occupant.

He saw an old man, half buried in furs on this sultry day. The withered face was ghastly with paint and such pigments as aged fools use with intent to keep with them the youth they have had well-nigh time to forget. An eyeglass was squeezed into the bleared eyes, an automatic smirk widened the carefully coloured lips, that were red enough to suit a Hebe, as he bent forward to salute a pretty woman, who flashed by in her Victoria. It was the Duke of Dawtry!

Wriothesley's heart grew sick within him. He had seen him twice before, but on both times at night, when even beneath the kindly light of the subdued lamps he had seemed to him a fit object for passing scorn. But now in the broad daylight, with its truthfully cruel sun lighting up each wrinkle and furrow, how inexpressibly loathsome he appeared. And to this pitiful object she was about to surrender herself, body and soul, for the sake of a false ambition.

The knowledge struck him as being full of sorrow. Such a careless flinging away of life's best gifts! Such a paltry gain. And then he told himself that if she could do this thing of her own free will, she was not worthy the poorest compassion, for she was past all feeling.

He had walked quite a long way—all up the Strand and through Fleet Street, and was in the very heart of the City when suddenly a craving for the sweet cool country came upon him. There he might bury himself, and "dree his weird" without this maddening hum, this flavour of hideous life, that pressed him in on every side. Oh! for the green fields, the silence, the farness from the "hum, the shock of men."

He stepped into a hansom, then into the train, and as the light began to fade he reached The Towers.

The sun was sinking. Again he had walked through the wooded uplands as on the first day of his return, and all the beauty of a perfect summer's evening was around him.

"An odour of hay o'er the woodlands blown"

was wafted by him, and the fresh warm resinous perfume of the firs met and mingled with it. He opened the postern gate, all overhung with ivy, that led into the pleasaunce, and went on slowly towards the house.

He could see it now, and the long straight walk that led to the gardens beyond that were hedged in by walls of yew. He went towards them, thinking always in a dull uninterested way.

"Hope is a lover's staff:"

that he had lost, and henceforth there was nothing left to

him on which to lean. He had gone abroad at a time when friendships warm and lasting are most likely to be made, and those he had made were now behind him in that bright oriental land. As for relations, he had none. Lady Mary was the last of them, and she now too was numbered with the dead, that love not, neither do they remember.

As he went through one of the openings in the yew wall he caught a glimpse of something slender and shadowy standing upon the balcony that ran outside the library windows He paused to look up at it, himself half hidden. The tall childish form in its sombre dinner-gown of black crape he recognized presently as Marvel, and with a start he suddenly remembered that he had altogether forgotten her. Her dress was made in the old-fashioned style that Lady Mary had always chosen for her—close fastened round the snowy throat, but sleeveless; her arms, white as that matchless throat, gleamed against the darkness of her gown. A broad black sash encircled her waist; her bright hair was gathered up and fastened into a knot on the top of her head by a little pearl comb, Lady Mary's last gift, and therefore doubly precious. There was something disconsolate in her attitude as she leant against a marble pillar and looked out over the sea; but all traces of sorrow, or whatever it was, left her as she chanced to turn her head and her eyes fell upon Wriothesley.

A low cry broke from her—a cry of triumph mixed with happy joy. In less than a minute she had run down the steps, had rushed across the path and placed her hands one on each of his arms.

"Didn't I say so," she cried; "didn't I know it? Only not *quite* perhaps, because it is even a little better than I knew. I felt that that horrid business would be kind and finish itself off in a hurry, and let you come back to me sooner than you imagined. Oh, how glad I am to have you here again; but," arching her brows with a sudden expression of self contempt, "what an amount of self-pity I did waste over my lonely evening, and after all it isn't lonely at all. And March says the Pekin duckling would take a prize at any show. And Molly the setter has had pups—such *beauties*. And Ashtaroth the foal ran away with

Peters. And — and *aren't* you glad to be home again?"

"Yes, very," he said, and smiled at her. But there was something so curious about the smile that she looked at him more intently and turned him with both her hands so that she could see his face more clearly, and then at once her joy died away.

"What has given you that strange look in your eyes?" she asked with all a child's directness. "It was not there when you left."

"No? I acquired it while on my travels then. One must purchase such things sooner or later on one's way through life. By-the-by, talking of purchases, I forgot to bring you that doll I promised."

"Don't talk to me like that," she said with quaint seriousness, "but tell me this thing truly. Did you learn to look like that up there in London?"

"I suppose so, though I don't exactly know how I look. You see I have no looking-glass but your eyes at present, and they tell me nothing but that you are—at this moment at all events—a very grave little girl." His attempt at lightness did not deceive her, and he saw it. "There, do not worry yourself about me," he went on hastily, "I have a bad headache—dyspepsia—neuralgia—what you will."

"I know," she said sorrowfully, drawing back a little, "I know quite well about *that*. It means that I am not to ask you questions—'little girls should be seen and not heard' sort of thing. Auntie had another way of doing it. She used to ask me to pick her a bunch of flowers in the far garden whenever she wanted to speak to the rector about anything I was not to hear. But is it to go on for ever like that? Am I never to be grown up, really? And besides, when one knows why one is sent away to pick flowers, where is the use of it? Now if you were to say to me, 'Marvel, do not please ask me any questions,' I should understand quite, and it would be far better than saying, 'Marvel, I have neuralgia,' when you haven't, and," gravely, "*truer*." Then with quick remorse, "But I am teazing you and you are unhappy. I wish," wistfully, "I

knew what had happened to you, that I might try to make you forget it." Then coaxingly, "*Tell* me."

She was standing on tiptoe, and with the slender fingers of her right hand she touched his face and turned it towards hers. She looked so fair, so sweet, so "unspotted from the world," that he had not the heart to rebuke her; and presently there grew on him a great desire to speak his trouble aloud to some one. He hesitated still for a moment, and then:

"I am ruined," he said simply.

"Ruined!" She repeated the word, gazing blankly at him and then half-unconsciously round upon the glowing garden, the cool verdures beyond, the distant pine-clad hills, all standing calm, serene, in the dewy flower-scented evening.

"Not so far as fortune is concerned," he explained with a bitter laugh. "My lands, my home, are still my own, as much mine as they were yesterday; but," with a sudden dull sense of pain, "with what different eyes I gaze upon them to-day." He ceased speaking, and it appeared as though he had forgotten she was still there, so absent grew his look.

"Some one has been unkind to you?" she said timidly, speaking her question very low.

"Some one has broken my heart," replied he slowly.

"Ah!" She pondered over this for a while, and then—"Was that why you came home so soon?"

"Yes."

She was silent for a few minutes. She was deeply grieved for him, stirred indeed to her heart, and it was a most tender heart too; yet far down in the depths of it was a little proud delight that in his sore trouble and disappointment, whatever it was, and she was far from knowing, his first thought had been to hasten home to her.

Poor child! she little guessed how small a part she had held in his vexed mind throughout that long terrible day.

"Was it in London it happened?"

"In town? Yes."

"Ah! auntie often told me it was a most unrighteous place," making an evident quotation with almost Lady Mary's look and tone and with a doleful shake of her

graceful head. "That business of yours went wrong then? You did not succeed?"

"Perhaps I did, who knows," said he with a frown. Then he sighed. "Oh! yes, it went abominably wrong; I came to signal grief over it."

"You lost your—suit?"

"I lost everything. My case was dismissed without a hearing."

"It was a bad business then?"

He smiled at that involuntarily.

"Very bad. Hopeless."

"And who was your enemy? A man or a woman?"

"I could not call her an enemy," said he absently; "hardly that in any fairness. She had every right to choose as she did."

"It *was* a woman then," triumphantly. "I knew it. Look, I will tell you something," said she confidentially. "I don't like women so well as men; they are less honest, I think." This piece of wisdom, evolved apparently from her inner consciousness—for what did she know of men and women—she delivered with a profound air. "Don't you think so?"

"Not when I look at you," returned he kindly, patting her shoulder. "I am not so blinded by prejudice that I can't see the truth that shines in your eyes; and don't mind what I have been saying, child. It would be a sin to burden your young mind with troubles such as mine. Forget them, and remember only that I shall in all probability outlive them."

There was a cynical bitterness in his tone now that she liked even less than the grief he had shown before. The hot tears rushed to her eyes.

"It is a shame—a shame!" she cried indignantly. "This morning you were so happy, and now—in a few short hours—you are wretched, and all because of some wicked creature in that big hateful city. Ah! wait until I am old enough to go there and find her, and charge her with her cruelty to you, and then she shall see!"

This awful threat was delivered with a stamp on the ground from the tiny satin slipper, and she threw up her

head with the air of an offended queen. There was quite a combative look in her soft eyes. It was a charming picture she made, standing there in the gloaming, with all her affection for him in arms to do battle for him.

"Thank you, my little champion," said Wriothesley with a faint smile. "If you look like that when you lead the attack, all must go down before you." Then he sighed wearily and turned away from her and went moodily down the garden path, with his arms folded behind him, as though she had never been.

But she was too faithful to take offence at that.

"Where are you going?" she cried eagerly, running after him. "Not away by yourself, to think of that odious business. Oh, *don't!* Are you not hungry? Will you not come in and——" she paused suddenly, and consternation lit her eyes. "What shall I do?" she said in deep distress. "I told Mrs. Bunch (housekeeper) not to have any late dinner for me, as you would dine in town. And now what is to become of you?"

"Don't trouble yourself about that, I want nothing."

"What have you eaten all day?" asked she, regarding him keenly. "Had you any luncheon? No? An early dinner, perhaps? *No!* Why," severely, "I do believe you have had *nothing!*"

"The best meal sometimes," said he; "but you are wrong. I had something. My breakfast this morning with you."

"And nothing else since! How foolish of you. Why, I should die of hunger if I eat nothing all day but my breakfast. Now, come in with me, I am going to have high tea, and I shall tell Bolton that you are starving. Yes, you are; and he will see that there is something substantial for you, and champagne and things. Come now, do."

It was impossible to refuse her, and indeed he began to be uncomfortably conscious that he had lived on nothing but his bitter reflections for many hours. He went with her into the house and there let her minister to him to her heart's content.

CHAPTER XI.

"Set not thy heart to follow after fate."
* * * * *
"It will not grow again, this fruit of my heart,
Smitten with sunbeams, ruined with rain."

"A MARRIAGE has been arranged to take place between his Grace the Duke of Dawtry and Mrs. Scarlett, widow of the late George Scarlett, Esq., of Chowton Hall, Surrey, and Middleton Park, Shropshire."

Wriothesley having read so far in the society paper he held, clenched his hand with a spasmodic gesture upon the sheet, and rising to his feet, left the room and his half-finished breakfast and made his way to the library.

Here he paced up and down in strong excitement, until the first shock of the news, as seen in print, had worn off. There was an end of it all now indeed! Hope at last was dead! He had given room to it, in spite of that scene with her, every word of which was clearly imprinted on his brain; he had still clung to the belief that she would relent, would at last, through sheer pity for herself, break that fatal bond. But now! no, she would not draw back now; she had blazoned abroad her engagement. The whole world knew of it by this time. She *meant* it.

His step grew slower, but his impatience quickened. A longing for action of some sort possessed him. Yet where could he go, what could he do? The world of town was closed to him. He felt he could not show himself there; that he had not the hardihood sufficient to view with equanimity the spectacle she would make dragging that old man at her chariot-wheels. And to stay down here, in this utter stagnation—that way madness lay! He had thought with longing only yesterday of the cool shades, the silence, the eternal calm, but now he knew he could not endure it, that this simple country life that left him so free to follow out his thoughts from their birth to their death, was too cruel a thing to bear. He wanted the stir, the bustle of living, and here there was no one—nothing; not a soul to exchange an idea with.

A clear soft voice rang through the old hall:

"In Scarlet town where I was born,
There was a fair maid dwellin',
Made all the lads cry well-a-day,
Her name was Barb'ra Allen."

The quaint sad little ditty smote in his ears. Yes, there was Marvel certainly. A pretty child, but only that. He should have to arrange about her, of course, before leaving. He comprehended in this moment that he had made up his mind to go abroad.

The sweet girlish voice came nearer, rising and falling on the way:

"Young man, I think you're dying."

She opened the door, and seeing him, stopped short.

"You here? I thought you had gone out. And do you know you left your breakfast behind you? You are busy? I am disturbing you, perhaps? Well I can go away again."

"Stay," said Wriothesley; "perhaps it is I who am disturbing you, and all places are alike to me. What brings you here at this hour?"

"To study. From ten to eleven I read my French, or German, or my Latin. The rector," with a quaintly learned air, "says Latin is the root of all learning."

"And, of course, the rector knows. Has he forbidden such frivolous studies as music, drawing——"

"My music I practise from one to two. My drawing later, when I go out walking. The woods, the lake, the sea, give me ever varying views."

"Such a well regulated day! Why, you are still in the schoolroom, then?" said he in some surprise.

"Oh, no!" with a light touch of offence. "I have no governess now. I am seventeen—I am grown up! But I do all this because—because I have always done it, and because auntie would be vexed, I think, if she knew I was idling away my time."

"Faithful little soul!" said Wriothesley. And then after a while, "Well, I am glad you can so happily fill your days, as work that is not irksome to you will keep you from *ennui*, and—and loneliness, and that. I should not

like to think, when I was far from you, that you had that mournful little expression of yours always on your face."

"When you are—*far* from me?" She glanced at him nervously. He paused, and then said abruptly:

"I am going abroad."

"Abroad!" She echoed the word faintly; her hand fell down from the table on which it had been resting and hung loosely by her side. Wriothesley was not looking at her, so he did not see the expression on her face, and her voice only sounded a little low to him, no more.

"Yes, away from this place—from England—to—*anywhere!* I find I cannot stand it. That 'business' yesterday has shown me that life here would be intolerable. I shall remain away for years, I daresay—for ever, *I hope.* Of course, I shall see about you before going. There is my cousin, Mrs. Verulam." He was speaking dreamily now, as if more to himself than to her. "She is young. A widow. She has few ties, beyond that child of hers. She would be a suitable person—if it can be arranged. And ——"

The girl walked over to the window and pressed her forehead hard against the cool glass.

"*For ever!*" she said. It was all she had heard. Wriothesley was still talking—always rather disconnectedly—but she was not listening. Quite at once, as it were, she faced him with a vehement air, her eyes flashing, her lips deadly white, her nostrils dilated.

"Your promise!" she cried, "your promise, Fulke, have you forgotten *that?*"

"My promise!" For the first time he looked at her, and marked the agitation that filled her, "what promise?"

"That you would never leave me—that you would stay with me—that you would be to me what auntie was. Oh, auntie, *auntie!* You *told* me I should never be lonely again—and now!——"

"If you will only listen——"

"My guardian you said you were. A guardian is one who guards, and how can you guard me if you go abroad—*for ever.* Oh, who could *think* you would be so cruel!"

She sank down upon a chair, overcome by the intensity of her emotion. Wriothesley was considerably put out,

and, indeed, sorry for her, but he felt, too, that it would have given him pleasure to shake her.

"My dear child," he said, "people often make rash promises that cannot be kept. When I said all that you have so correctly quoted I quite believed my home would be, for the future, here in England; but fate, chance, circumstance, what you will, has ordained it otherwise. I would keep my promise if I could—but—how can I?"

She started to her feet.

"You can," she cried, in an anguished tone, "don't you see how you can? *Take me with you!*"

He looked at her sharply, and instantly came to the conclusion that so audacious a proposal could only, in her case, come from one supremely innocent.

"I didn't promise to do that," said he, hardly knowing what to say.

"I know," her tone was full of sore distress, "but your *real* promise; you can fulfil it so. I don't want you to live in England! I don't care where you live, I only want to be with you."

"Look here, Marvel," said he with some asperity, "you are very young, I know, but that is no reason why you should be a—er—so utterly absurd. A moment ago you were rather annoyed with me because I imagined you to be still in the schoolroom; you wished me to regard you as a woman grown, yet here you are behaving like the veriest baby. It is time you should learn that a girl of your age cannot roam about the world with a man of mine, unless he were to marry her!"

He thought this a conclusive argument, but there he was mistaken.

"Well, why *don't* you marry me then," said she, resentful tears filling her eyes.

He stared at her in undisguised amazement, hardly knowing what to say, or think; and then, all suddenly, the meaning of her words struck him. If he were to marry her! The immediate past spread itself out before him, and he saw again, and once more heard, scenes and words that were over and done. The old sweet woman with her pale beautiful face, calm with the approach of death un-

feared—he saw her first, and heard her entreating him, in gentle accents, to befriend the lonely child she had loved and reared. Her eyes besought him—— And then, that other, with a devilry of mockery in her beautiful face, showing him that solution of the problem that perplexed him. "Marry her," such was her advice. Well, how if he obeyed her in this, as he had in all things during their brief, too fatally sweet acquaintance! With a fierce joy, he thought of how she would look when first she heard of it. To be so soon forgotten—*that* would touch her. And she had always been jealous of the child; it would be a revenge, satisfying and sure, if she cared. *If!* Why, if he hastened matters he might so manage as to be married before her. She should not think of him for long as a despondent lover, wounded to death; she should see the announcement of his marriage, the actual accomplished fact in all the papers, as he had seen that cursed *on dit* about hers this morning.

Then his thoughts grew calmer and better as they went back to Lady Mary; his promise to her returned to him. A promise to the dead should be sacred; they cannot reproach or accuse. And how better could he fulfil his than in this strange way that Marvel, in her ignorance, had presented to him? She would have his name, a sure protection, and at his death (a thing, he considered with a thrill of hope, that might happen to him at any time, as it does to all), everything of which he was possessed. As for the child herself it was her own wish, and she would certainly pine if left here alone, in this huge, silent house, with those dead or gone who had been all in all to her. And he would be her friend for life, that he swore to himself. She should be first with him in all things—at least, such things over which he had power. To love again as he had—as he did love (he was at all events, honest with himself)—was beyond him. In this wise, fears for her future would be ended. It helped him, too, to his growing decision, to know that Lady Mary, if living, would have given her sanction to the match. Some words of hers recurred to him, and repeated themselves over and over again in his brain: "Wrapt in mystery as is her birth I

should yet esteem the man who wins her heart as more than usually happy."

He looked suddenly to where Marvel was, and what he saw there hastened his decision. She was sitting on a low seat, her head drooping, her fingers interlaced; deepest melancholy lay round her childish lips.

He went over to her, and leaning on the back of a chair, said deliberately:

"You think if I were to — that is, if you were to marry me it would arrange matters, and make you happier? So be it, then."

She drew her breath quickly, but said nothing.

"Will you?" he said.

"Would it —" lifting her large anxious eyes to his — "would it mean that you would take me with you when you go abroad for ever?"

"Certainly. That is exactly what it would mean." No more, he thought.

"Then I will," she said solemnly.

She looked at him earnestly, and as she looked the gravity died from her, and her face changed, and a smile began to tremble on it. A moment later and the last remnant of her grief and fear had vanished as a cloud melts before the embrace of the sun.

"Is it true? Is it real?" she cried. "Shall I indeed go with you? Oh Fulke when you spoke of going for ever my heart felt as if it must break! And it *would* have broken; I could not have lived on here alone; I should have died." She gave a sigh to that past misery. "I have no one. No one but you," she murmured. "And now I shall have you always—*always*. Oh!" She ran to him in a little ecstasy of delight and threw her arms round him, and gave him a grateful hug. "And there is one thing," she went on presently, leaning back from him, so as the better to look into his face and mark the effect of her words, "I shan't be a bit of trouble to you. Not a bit. You shall *see!* I shall be as good as gold and *never* in the way."

"Do you think you can be ready in a hurry?" asked he, filled now with his own desire to quit England and the

woman who had deceived him, in hot haste. "At once, I mean. In a real hurry. Could you—" with some hesitation, feeling uncertain as to how she would take it, or rather *certain*—"could you marry me—say to-morrow?"

"This minute if you like," she said heartily. "What is to prevent it?"—a joyous accession to his wishes that fairly took his breath away. He regarded her strangely. In such a hurry to be made a countess! But as he looked he knew he wronged her, and that not so much as one mercenary or ambitious thought dwelt in her pretty, loving head.

"What, indeed!" he said. And then suddenly he burst out laughing; it was impossible to help it. Was there ever such a strange wooing; such a strange child? A child of seventeen. The people of his world would laugh if he described her to them. *She* had laughed! His brow darkened as he remembered that.

"Still we may as well give ourselves time to look about us," he said, "and arrange our affairs and put them in order; and whether we like it or not," with another smile, "we shall have to wait for the yacht to come round here before we can start on our voyage round the world."

"Is it in the yacht we shall go?" asked she, opening wide her delighted eyes.

"Yes, there is nothing like the sea. And once you are accustomed to it, and have had time to forget the first unpleasant feeling, you——"

"Oh! I know all about it," interrupted she contemptuously, throwing up a most disdainful face. "Did you think I was a land crab entirely? I know everything about the sea, except," with emphasis, "the unpleasantness. *I* am never sea-sick," with a glance that implied her belief that *he* was sometimes, or else he could not know so much about it. "The rector and I used to go out together very often last autumn, and one day, when there was a terrible sea on, and when every one, even the *sailors*, were squeamish a bit, and the poor rector was quite dreadfully ill, I!" proudly, "felt nothing but the grand sweet touch of the salt spray on my face, as the water washed right over me."

"That's right. Then you will enjoy yourself."

"And what clothes shall I take, Fulke? My winter ones, or my summer? If winter I shall have to buy some, because I have nothing warm, that is," with a sudden change to gravity, "for mourning. Shall we be going to cold places or to hot ones?"

"Both, in all probability; so bring all you can, and we can buy the others on our journey. I don't myself know where we are bound for. We shall wander away out into the unknown world, like two outcasts, anywhere, everywhere."

"It is like a fairy tale," she said in a little hushed tone. "Oh dear, darling Fulke, how kind of you to take me with you. And where shall we go?"

"Wherever our fancy guides us."

"*Our?* shall I have a choice then?"

"The first, if you wish it; so now decide."

"Athens?" questioned she, with an eager glance at him. "Would that please you? I have all my life so longed to see Athens."

"Like all longings," said he slowly, "it will end in disappointment. The Athens of your dreams is, I imagine, a widely different thing from the Athens you will see when broad awake. However, one must be disillusioned sooner or later. Begin with Athens. It will hurt you less, believe me, than the awakenings farther on in your life's voyage."

"You speak sadly," said she. "I shall not like to go to Athens if you don't. Name some other place."

"All places are alike to me. No, Athens let it remain. At all events the Mediterranean will not disappoint you. And now run away. There is much to be done. A special licence to be procured—— "

"What's that?" said she.

"Eh? Oh! A permit from her Majesty for our espousals!" She did not see he was laughing, and grew quite solemn over the thought of the nuptials. It occurred to her *en passant*, that the Queen must have a busy time of it if she had to give leave to *everybody* to get married. "You see it is a very important step you are about to take," went on Wriothesley, whose humour this morning was a degree saturnine, so it was no wonder she did not grasp it. "I

have to write an order to the skipper to bring round the yacht and see that it is properly victualled. There are several ladies' cabins on board tolerably comfortable, so you need not be uneasy about *that*." She had not given it a thought. "There will be, too, a word to the rector, a little packing I suppose, and then, hey! for your dilapidated Athens."

He spoke as lightly as he could. His brain seemed burning. She ran off to the door bent on obeying him, though she would have dearly liked to stay with him and discuss the details of their voyage, bit by bit; but when she got to the door she paused, hesitated, and finally came back to him, very slowly, and rubbing her forefinger in a pretty embarrassed fashion across, and across again, her rosy lips:

"Fulke," she said shamefacedly, not daring to look at him, "you—you won't change your mind when I am gone, will you? If——" She came to a dead stop.

"I shall not change my mind," said he, "but go on; what was that 'if' about?"

"If I thought you would I should stay here," said she naively.

"Be happy. I sha'n't," said he.

She went once more towards the door, and having reached it, once more turned back. This time she came quite up to him, and slipped her cool slender fingers into his.

"Tell me," she said, "do husbands ever leave their wives? *Can* they?"

Was there ever so perplexing a child. Again he felt that strong inclination to laugh, but this time he suppressed it. She was looking too serious.

"*Never!*" he said, with such a weight of positiveness in his tone that she was satisfied. She pondered over it, however, for a moment or two, and then made a little sound of perfect content, and stirred her fingers in his as if to remove them and go; but Wriothesley, however, tightened his grasp on them, and so detained her.

"But," said he, "wives have been known to leave their husbands!"

He hardly knew why he said this, but he could not

resist the desire to see how she would look when she heard it. If he expected an indignant disclaimer, however, he was disappointed.

"Have they? Why?" demanded she, with the utmost astonishment, but quite calmly, accepting what he had just said as loyally as she had the answer before it.

"Who shall say?" returned Wriothesley, not feeling equal to an explanation, and therefore carefully avoiding it.

"Oh! it is too foolish," said she at last. "I'm sure you mean what you say, Fulke; but I think somebody has been deceiving you. After all I don't believe a word of it. 'Tis a story. Just *fancy* my leaving *you!*"

CHAPTER XII.

"Who breathes must suffer, and who thinks must mourn;
And he alone is bless'd who ne'er was born."

MR. BAINBRIDGE, the rector, was a tall, gaunt old man, much stooped, and with a handsome head, which was plentifully sprinkled with grey hair. He had keen eyes and a strong mouth—a trifle stern, and he walked with a staff. He was older even than he looked, and he had served his Master faithfully so long a time in this world that he believed himself to be standing almost on the brink of the next. He was tall and strong, however, in body, if rather tired in soul. The turmoils of life had wearied him, and the loss of many friends, and this last irreparable loss—the death of Lady Mary, who had been more to him than most, had given him an ever-growing desire to wing his way to that land where partings are unknown.

As Lord Wriothesley entered the cool study where he sat the rector looked up at him with a gaze that was a trifle prolonged.

"Home again," he said, when he had shaken hands with him. "I believed you far from this, and was pleased to so believe. I heard yesterday that you had returned to

town, and I thought you would have remained there. The monotony of this calm country life can hardly be to the taste of any young man."

"You are thinking about Marvel," said Wriothesley, simply, brushing aside the veil the elder man would have held before his real meaning. "So am I. She is a question that has vexed me for many a day, but now I think I have found an answer to it. I am going abroad for a considerable time, and I am going to marry Marvel, and take her with me."

Mr. Bainbridge made no immediate reply. He leaned back in his chair, put the tips of his fingers together with methodical precision, and took an exhaustive survey of Wriothesley, who bore the studied inspection with the utmost indifference. Finally he said:

"You really mean it, then?"

"Certainly I mean it. I was never more in earnest about anything in my life. Why should you doubt it? I have spoken to Marvel, and she has agreed to throw in her lot with mine."

There was no touch of tenderness in either tone or words, as the old man, who was a keen student of human nature, noted.

"Marvel is but a baby," he said.

"A very determined one, at all events. She made up her mind yesterday not to be left behind when I started, and you see she has carried her point." He laughed as if at some recollection that amused him. "I have run down to you," he went on, "to arrange about the bell, book and candle part of the transaction. A special licence will be necessary, as I am rather in a hurry to quit my native shores. Could it be managed by Thursday?"

"What? Your going?"

"No. My marriage."

He spoke in a careless way that vexed the rector, whose affection for Marvel was deep and genuine.

"Why this extraordinary haste?" he asked.

"Well, it suits me;" replied Wriothesley, as if further explanation was unnecessary. He did not notice that Mr. Bainbridge was growing disturbed.

"And Marvel?" said the latter, sharply. "Does it suit *her?*"

"Even more than me." He turned away from the window here, and looked straight at the rector, and looking smiled. "Why, my dear old friend, you need not be uneasy about that," he said. "I assure you I consulted her."

"I was wrong to doubt you. You were always a kind lad," said Mr. Bainbridge slowly; "but one thing I must say to you, Wriothesley—your heart is not in this."

"There you are at fault. My heart is unquestionably in it. I long, like the veriest schoolboy, for the moment in which I shall set sail."

"You avoid my real meaning. You heart is not in this marriage, I should have said."

"You were always a croaker," retorted the younger man, with affectionate lightness; "but all your evil surmisings will not serve you here. I am not to be daunted by them. Do you know," dropping into a more confidential tone, "that it was Lady Mary's wish, and I myself think it to be the best way of settling everything. Marvel has no home, no—name. I have no relations to call me to account for a marriage that in all probability would be called by the world a *mésalliance*—you see how plainly I speak to you—or, to say the least of it, a trifle rash. I have looked everything in the face, have weighed everything, and I te'l you honestly, I have no fears for myself, and few for her."

"I would you had more," said the rector.

"You think I do wrong in this matter," said Wriothesley quickly.

"I think you do not love her. Hear me patiently, Wriothesley; 'tis an old man that speaks, and surely I have the right of an early friendship with you and that good woman, that saint that now is—Lady Mary—to speak my mind freely, and warn you when I see you bent on driving your life's bark upon the rocks. Just now you used the word homeless with regard to Marvel. Do not marry her because you dread that for her. A home awaits her here. I am an old man. I love the child. I would gladly have such a daughter to tend my declining days. At my

death all that I have shall be hers—a not very inconsiderable portion. Do not therefore sacrifice her youth for that reason."

"You speak as though I were about to do her some mortal injury," said Wriothesley hotly. "Nay, speak to *her* then; has she, do you think, no voice in this decision?"

"That she loves you is plain. Who runs may read that simple tale," said the old man calmly; "but, do you love her?"

"Twice you have asked me that question. Hear my answer, then: such love as you speak of is not mine to give. It is all over, gone past recalling."

"Dead?" asked his inquisitor.

"Not dead. Worse than that: hopelessly alive. You see I am honest with you." He had grown very pale.

"But not with her, I see. And this love you speak of. It still lives—eh?"

"Even so, it cannot harm Marvel."

"There is another woman?"

"You go very far," said Wriothesley, his brow darkening. He bit his lips, then as his eyes met the full, clear, beautiful eyes of the old man his anger died away from him as an unworthy thing. "Say what you will to me," he said impetuously, "I will endure it. Yes, there is another, who spurned this love about which you so cruelly probe me. I offered it to her, full, entire, but she rejected it. There is, therefore, as I said, no danger for Marvel."

"This other woman may change her mind," said Mr. Bainbridge slowly, and looking at the handsome high-bred face before him, he could hardly believe that any woman born could be unkind to the owner of it, "and then?"

"She will not do that. She—is to be married shortly. Her marriage is arranged."

He turned abruptly away and stood looking out into, but not seeing, the brilliant little garden outside that was the rector's pride. The latter remained silent, saddened by the younger man's story, and for a few minutes no sound broke the soft stillness of the room. Presently Wriothesley spoke again, his voice harsh and strained.

"Now you know all, and that I am over and done with such follies for ever."

"You are too young a man to speak like that. Some day your love will wake again; and how if it should not awaken for your wife?"

"Hah! old Raven! what would you say more?" cried Wriothesley, catching him by both arms and laughing grimly into his face. "Why not prognosticate rather that some day it will awaken for my wife?"

"Because I have lived long, too long," said the old man sadly, "and I have learned in my dreary pilgrimage that no man wakens to love for the thing he has—a woman might, a man *never!*"

"You have forgotten one thing—that there are exceptions to all rules. Let my case be one, or rather believe, what is indeed the most likely thing, that I have done with that foolish fever called love, and that I shall be faithful to Marvel for ever. Come, trust me. I shall be her friend always."

"Her husband you mean," drily. "Well, as you have so arranged it between you, so let it be. Providence ordains all things, and who am I, that I should dare to step in and seek to turn aside this brilliant destiny you offer her. Yet, one last word." He drew nearer, and laid his thin right hand upon Wriothesley's shoulder. "Remember, she is as ignorant of all things evil as a child should be. Guard her, cherish her. The sin, the sorrow, the suffering of the world are alike unknown to her. You are taking a pure sweet soul into your keeping, Wriothesley; see that you preserve it so."

CHAPTER XIII.

"Love! I will tell thee what it is to love:
It is to build with human thoughts a shrine,
Where hope sits brooding like a beauteous dove—
Where life seems young, and like a thing divine."

As for Marvel, she was intensely happy during those few days before her marriage. She was enchanted with every

arrangement made for the strange voyage, and ran hither and thither doing needless little messages for Wriothesley, whom she drove to the verge of irritability twenty times a day.

She laughed for almost the first time since her auntie's death, and chattered incessantly. Of course somebody should be told the glad news that she was not to be lonely any more, and that she was to go away with Lord Wriothesley in the pretty white-winged yacht. First she ran down to the Rectory. It was after Wriothesley's visit there, and she was so full of her own story that she hardly noticed how gravely her old friend listened and how few raptures he displayed. Then she told her nurse, and soon all the servants knew it. Extreme was their astonishment. Yet it was a proof of the sweetness of her nature that no one grudged her her luck, so greatly had she endeared herself to them all during her young life at The Towers.

Then came the wedding morning. She rose early and went for a solitary wander through the gardens and those parts of the ground that had grown more especially dear through fond associations. The clear ringing of a bell within the house warned her that time was flying, so with many a farewell glance and sigh, and not without a few tears, she returned to her room.

There breakfast was served to her, and there she dressed herself in one of the simple white gowns her auntie had so loved. After a long, long hesitation she decided on putting aside even the black sash for this one day and wearing a white one. A faint recollection of having been told many years ago that white in some countries was mourning returned to her and gave her some little consolation, but in spite of all that, the discarding of the black sash troubled her.

Her mind was full of Lady Mary on this her marriage day. In some strange occult way she seemed to be very near to her. When her toilette was quite completed she dismissed her maid and knelt down before a tall oaken chair and prayed fervently for a little while—that Fulke might be happy always—and she too—and good—and that he might always love her.

Tears trembled on her long lashes as she finished her earnest supplication, though she was neither nervous nor distrustful, and it appeared to her as if her auntie were waiting close beside her to carry her simple prayer to Heaven.

In the hall Fulke met her. She smiled at him and gave him her hand; and he—who was accustomed to her impetuous actions—felt some surprise as she made no movement to offer him the customary morning kiss. Perhaps she forgot it. Certainly it was no new shyness, because it did not occur to her to be shy.

Together they walked through the glowing woods to the private chapel, whither Mrs. Bunch, the housekeeper, in her "best bib and tucker," had gone on before, that Marvel should not find herself without one of her own sex to support her there—"and that upon her weddin'-mornin' too—pore dear little pretty!"

Mr. Bainbridge, in full canonicals, met the bride and bridegroom at the church-porch. It was most irregular, and scarcely orthodox; but he was so uneasy about Marvel that he could not refrain from getting a glimpse of her before the commencement of the ceremony. He felt in a measure conscience-stricken. Had he done his duty? Should he not have put forth all his power to prevent this marriage that instinct warned him would not be for her good? Yet, when he saw her clad all in her bridal white, and when she raised her head and showed the sweet, unworldly, peaceful smile upon her lips, his fears and his remorse alike vanished; and it was in a clear and hopeful tone that he presently read the marriage-service.

Mrs. Bunch, in the family pew, shed many tears behind her lavender cotton gloves, and all the maids who had gained permission to attend sniffed audibly. Wriothesley himself looked pale, and there was a strange unnatural gleam in his eyes; but Marvel stood calm and earnest, making the responses in a soft distinct voice and listening to all that the rector said with an air of solemnity and awe, not doubting or fearing, but simply, as one learning her duty.

In the vestry room she signed her name, "Marvel

Craven," in her firm beautiful handwriting, and afterwards she kissed the rector and then her husband.

"God bless you!" said Mr. Bainbridge fervently. He appeared agitated, and wrung Wriothesley's hand, whispering to him in a low tone to "Be good to her"—not so low however but that Marvel heard it; and she laughed gaily, and, patting his arm, asked him if he thought Fulke was an ogre.

Then Wriothesley asked the old man to return with them to The Towers, but he excused himself; and indeed little time was left to the bride and bridegroom to linger over breakfast, as they were to go on board the yacht early in the afternoon, and there were yet those usual terrible last things to be seen to.

So Marvel and he went back alone to the house, walking through the woods as they had come, and into the hall, where Mrs. Bunch and most of the servants, men and women, were assembled to greet them.

"I wish you joy, my lady," said Mrs. Bunch, coming a little forward and dropping a low respectful courtesy.

"Eh?" said Marvel softly, as if not understanding; and then—"'My lady!' How strange it sounds!" She laughed rather nervously, and then tears came into her eyes. That had been her auntie's name! "Thank you," she said sweetly to good old Mrs. Bunch, who loved her and comprehended that last thought—as indeed did all the servants. She placed both hands on the old woman's shoulders, and bent to her and pressed her fresh young cheek to the withered old face.

* * * * * *

They were standing in the library, almost ready to start, when Wriothesley noticed the locket that Marvel wore round her neck. It was the same old battered ornament she had had on her on the night she had been rescued by him from the storm.

"How many years it is since I saw that," he said, touching it; "and what a mite you were then! You remember?"

"I remember that you saved me. Auntie told me always to keep this locket, as it might help me to find—to

trace some one belonging to me. You know I have neither father, brother, nor sister," she said simply. "I have indeed no one—no one"—in a low tone—"but you!"

"Well, I shall be father and brother to you," he said kindly. He thanked Heaven she did not ask for his love. That would have meant a thorough explanation, and one that now would be of no avail.

He felt as though he were in a dream, standing there with the girl—little more than a child—beside him, who in reality was his wife. For a moment he was almost overcome by a horrible longing to undo it all—to escape from her—to be free once more; but it was too late! He drew a deep breath, and compelled himself to return to the listless indifferent tone and manner which he had adopted ever since he had arranged his marriage. He despised himself for his new mood. He doubly despised himself for the thought that had sprung to life with her last words, that he had indeed given the good old name to a woman who was herself nameless!

It was still in the white gown that Marvel went on board the yacht. She had elected to wear it all through this day, and then to set it apart and keep it ever sacred, as her wedding-gown. So much she thought about her marriage, but little more. The real thing was that she was going to sail away, away, away with Fulke to summer seas and sunny lands.

She found her own cabin an exquisite little affair, and that for her maid was scarcely less so. The captain, a bluff old sailor, received her as though she were a slim little princess, and before the sun sank behind the hills of her old home, up went the anchor, and with many a musical yo-ho the "Merry Maid" bent to the evening breeze and faded away into the gathering mist like a winged spirit.

CHAPTER XIV.

"That some weighty grief
O'erhangs thy soul, thy ev'ry look proclaims:
Why then refuse it words?"

It was a charming morning, bright with sunshine, as they sighted Gibraltar. The world was three weeks older then than on that eventful day when Marvel for the first time possessed a name. It had been a three weeks of unalloyed enjoyment to her, not a shadow having darkened the days that sped all too swiftly. She was with Fulke, and she was happy. Not that she saw much of him, but she was quite content with the knowledge that he was somewhere near, and she had early learned that she was not to be a "trouble to him," which meant that she was not to break in upon his moods when he appeared silent and *distrait*. And this was often.

Each day found him more self-contained, and, if disturbed, more irritable. At first he had conscientiously done his best to make her comfortable on board the yacht, and to entertain her: he treated her always as an honoured guest. And there were days of delicious sight seeing for her who had never until then seen anything but an English village, when they had stopped here and there on their way, putting into certain ports and "doing" such sights as were to be seen. At each place he loaded her with trinkets, or *bric-à-brac* of the choicest kinds, and she, like a delighted child, forgot, or did not notice, that the enjoyment was all on her side.

At Gibraltar they expected to receive any letters or papers that might be forwarded to them, and Wriothesley for two days before they reached it could hardly restrain the cruel impatience with which he looked forward to the news that the society journals especially might contain. He could see the paragraphs describing how Leonie looked as a bride, each dainty detail of her wedding gown, the list of guests, the false flattering mention of the ancient groom.

It was all terrible to him, and the constant strain, the perpetual dwelling on the one subject, injured him both in mind and body. He grew pale and thin, filled as he was with an undying love for one woman and an undying remorse for that love when he remembered another, until at last the pretty laughing presence of Marvel grew insupportable to him.

Instinctively she felt this, but so vaguely that it hardly rendered her uneasy; but a desire to do something that should please him, that should win her a smile, incited her to be the first to receive the post when it arrived and to carry it herself to him.

Wriothesley, who happened to be engaged at the moment, seeing her enter with a large packet and several letters and papers, changed colour and went quickly to her with eagerly-extended hands. She gave him what she brought, looking shyly at him for a word of thanks, but none came. One last paper remained in her grasp.

"Here," she said playfully, holding it out, "and how much for this, my lord?"

But he did not hear her, did not even see her. He had turned aside, and flinging himself into a chair had torn the wrapper from the paper she had last given him. It was the one he had been waiting for so long.

Marvel turned away with a sense of having been forgotten, and with a heightened colour. She was only a child at heart, and she was in a degree offended. He might have thanked her, she thought, for being the one to bring him that post for which he had so wearied! But he had thought of nothing but that stupid paper. She hoped she should never see a number of it again. She should recollect always the colour of its cover.

Meantime, Wriothesley with a rapid hand turned the pages. Here, there, he looked for the dreaded announcement, but as yet saw nothing. The small society paragraphs gave no mention of any fashionable wedding in which her name stood prominent. He had drawn a breath of curious relief and had just turned a fresh page half-carelessly when a heading in large letters caught his eye:

"Sudden death of the Duke of Dawtry."

He read it three or four times, and having mastered it (rather a trouble to him, because of the shock to his brain) he went quietly on with the rest of the article. Only a few words of it clung to him. On the eve of his marriage! On the eve! She had *not* married him then! And now she was free! *Free!* He half-started from his seat, forgetting all things but that, and that he must go to her. Then memory returned in its full power; Marvel's face stood out before him, and with a groan he sank back again, and leaning his arms upon the table let his head fall forwards on them.

It was thus that Marvel found him an hour later. She had repented her short-lived anger, and in a sweet, penitent mood had come back to him. She saw at a glance that it was the paper she had given him that was lying open on the table before him. Something in his attitude, that had a good deal to do with despair, frightened her and she came quickly to his side.

"Fulke, what is it?" she asked nervously, laying her hand upon his shoulder. He started and looked up, withdrawing sharply from her touch as he did so, and she saw that his face was ghastly.

"Nothing," he said. "I beg you will not worry me now. It is nothing."

"Do not speak to me like that," she entreated trembling. "Tell me your trouble—let me try to comfort you."

He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. There was a terrible expression in his eyes as they rested on her.

"*You!*" he said. "*You*, to comfort me! You, who have been my undoing! Go, I tell you. Leave me. I must be alone."

"You mean——?" she said. She was trembling from head to foot. His manner was so strange, so wild, that she was quite unnerved. "Fulke, speak to me."

"What have I to say? What have you to hear? Except—that I would I had never seen you." There was the bitter savagery of truth in his tone. He had lost all control over himself, but when he had dealt the death-blow he felt sobered. "There—forgive me, I hardly know what I say. I told you to go," he said, and then he waited,

knowing, yet hardly caring for her pain, so great was his own.

She paused for a moment as if turned into stone, and then went softly out of the saloon.

CHAPTER XV.

"Before our lives divide for ever,
While time is with us——

* * * * *

"Time, swift to fasten and swift to sever
Hand from hand, as we stand by the sea."

SHE felt stunned, terrified. She crept slowly up the stairs to the deck where the salt breeze blew upon her face, and in a strange, vague way created in her a desire for tears. But she repressed them, and seeing a wicker chair on her right hand, went to it and sank down wearily amongst the cushions.

Her hands fell listlessly upon her lap, and she stared out seaward with hot strained eyes, to see nothing but a limitless ocean all around her and above a cloudless sky. For the first time the exquisite smiling beauty of nature seemed to her repellant. Oh, for clouds, for rain, for tempest! for anything save this heartless brilliance.

How had she offended him that he should look at her like that? What fault committed that he should say those dreadful words. He had said she was his "undoing!" There was something surely, and it was in that paper, the paper she had given him last. Oh, how unfortunate she was, that *hers* should have been the hand to deal him a fatal wound. She knew instinctively that he was hurt past healing, but—what was it?

She had never thought very seriously of her marriage. It had been to her only a delightful, a very lucky arrangement that had enabled her to go with him wheresoever he went, as it seemed she could not have done unless those few solemn words had been read over them by the rector. But

now, to-day, as she sat there in sore distress there came to her the knowledge that marriage with her meant that he could not marry another, and, perhaps, there—was—another —some one who——

She felt as though she were suffocated. She grew very pale, and her fingers began to pluck nervously at her gown. If *that* was it—if she was in his way! The choking sensation rose still higher in her throat, and instinctively she put up one slender hand to it. Surely, *surely* there must be some way of undoing a marriage such as hers; loveless, undesired, nay, now detested! It *should* be done. Why, what was it after all? a few words, no more!

She would go to Fulke and passionately appeal to him. She would let him at once know he should be free, free as air to—go to that other. She rose hurriedly, and then as suddenly reseated herself. No; it would not do to go now. He would think she was hurt, or angry, or offended. She would let a day or two go by, so that he should not guess all that was in her heart, and then she would entreat him to let her return home, to annul this marriage that was so distasteful to him. It was her first little bit of dissimulation, and somehow it hurt her.

But how if it could not be undone! This thought was terrible to her. It must; it *should!* And at all events, there was one thing positive, she would not stay with him now she had grown hateful to him. She would not wait to see again that look that had darkened his face to-day. She could not. She assured herself that it would kill her.

She was trembling all over now and feeling really ill. The captain had placed a shawl around her a while ago, because there was a sharp wind blowing, that carried a little chill with it, and one of the sailors had silently pushed a footstool beneath her feet. They were all devoted to her, from the captain down to the cabin boy, and ready at any moment to do her loyal service.

She was so young, so merry, so joyous. She would run about amongst them all day, like an overgrown child, talking to them as if they were her equals, though yet with a certain sweet dignity that commanded their admiration. She found out all about the men from themselves; as to

who were married and how many little children they had awaiting them at home, and she knew too of the sweethearts, and what each lad was going to bring his lass from foreign parts. And there wasn't a man amongst them who didn't follow her every movement on board the "Merry Maid" with a sense of honest pleasure and a simple worship of her.

To-day they saw that "some'at ailed my lady." And, indeed, her poor little ladyship looked sad enough to provoke sympathy in even the hardest heart.

"What a rich feast the canker grief has made;
How has it sucked the roses of thy cheeks!
And drunk the liquid crystal of thy eyes."

When the tears rose to her eyes, however, she blinked them back again. No, she would not cry; such misery as hers was not to be consoled by a few drops wrung from her heart. Tears could not ease her. And then all suddenly anger grew within her gentle breast, and she told herself it was unjust, unfair. Because sorrow had come to him was no reason why he should look at her as if—as though—he—*loathed* her! Oh, yes, that was the word. The very sight of her had grown hideous to him. It was a shame—a shame!

Then all at once her anger died from her. No, no; it was all her own fault.

She had *asked* him to take her with him, and out of the goodness of his heart he had not found it possible to refuse; and now he was wretched—and it was all her fault. *She*—who loved him, had made him so. Oh! if her auntie had but lived.

She went down to her cabin and threw herself on her bed, and cried herself into a severe headache.

It was a long day. Very slowly the early autumn shadows crept across the sea and evening descended. She had refused any luncheon from her maid, and when at the usual dinner-hour Wriothesley himself knocked at her door, although she sprang into a sitting posture and the nervous colour flamed into her cheeks, she still said "No" to his inquiry, called from outside, whether she would not dine with him.

"Shall I send you in something?"

"No, thank you, nothing." There was a note of remorse in his tone that brought on her tears afresh, but she felt comfort in the knowledge that they were hidden from him.

"I am so sorry you have a headache. Do try to eat something, it will do you more good than anything," he still entreated her, and when she again declined he said, with some slight authority of tone:

"Come here to the door, Marvel; I want to see you."

Accustomed to obey, she got up, gave a hasty glance into her mirror, brushed back her lovely wavy hair, and seeing that she was pale, but not exactly repulsive because of her weeping, went reluctantly to the door. It was not locked, but it not being his custom to do so, Wriothesley had not entered the room.

When he saw her standing there, so pale and unhappy, his heart smote him. Was *this* Lady Mary's merry child? He could not call to mind the words he had spoken in his anguish, but he supposed they had been sufficiently hasty to hurt her. He did not dream they had been so cruel as they were.

"I have been unkind to you, Marvel," he said remorsefully. "But a hasty word or two you should not take so much to heart."

She regarded him in a sort of wonderment. "You—who have been my undoing!" "I would I had never seen you!" Were these mere hasty words? Truly, he did not love her if he could think so.

"Do not be distressed about it," she said sweetly; "after a while I shall not care much—not much. And besides," hastily, "I believe it is this tiresome headache that is troubling me most."

"Try some champagne. That may set you up again. Let me bring you some?"

"Oh, *no*, thank you."

"I wish you would. You look very pale, and it would make me feel easier about you."

"Would it?" She was thoughtful for a moment, and then, with thorough unselfishness, "Very well, you may

bring me some." Why should she make him uneasy? She had surely been trouble enough to him already. Ay! and grief, too. Her heart swelled with misery within her as she thought of it all; but his new kindliness did not for an instant shake her determination to rid him of her presence as soon as it should be possible.

She took the wine from him when he brought it, but she did not drink it, and she still persisted in her refusal to go to dinner, and Wriothesley departed a little puzzled by some subtle change in her that had been born within the last few hours. He consoled himself with the thought that a child like that only wanted a good night's rest to forget even a poignant grief, and at heart indeed he was considerably relieved at her persistent disinclination to dine with him.

In his present mood he shrank from a *tete-à-tete* with her. He had roused himself from his stupor to speak to her, a sense of duty driving him to make amends for those angry words he half recollected having spoken. But he was glad to be able to go back again to his miserable regrets without any one to study him with large clear child-like eyes. His mind was unsettled; yesterday he knew that his idol was still loved by him with a deep but unpardoning love; to-day there was no thought of pardon, only a wild longing to reach her, to kneel at her feet, to implore her grace once more; and with this the knowledge that he was powerless to stir!

And something more, too! A cold, curious sense of revenge gratified!

CHAPTER XVI.

"Sick in the world's regard, wretched and low."

THE next day she found the paper and deliberately searched it. She felt no dishonour attached itself to her for thus endeavouring to fathom his secret; she meant only to know for certain this thing that stood between him and her. She would make no mistake; she would try fully to understand

everything, that afterwards she might be assured that she had done him no wrong in act or thought by leaving him.

The paper was considerably crumpled on one page, as though a hand had involuntarily clutched it, and this she felt was where the mystery lay. She scanned the page hurriedly, and the large startling print of the first heading entered into her: "Sudden death of the Duke of Dawtry." She read and re-read it, in silent wonderment, and then the paragraph beneath. But Mrs. Scarlett's name was not mentioned there, and she scarcely knew what to think when she had come to the end of it. She knew this, however, that the reading of that article had caused him to look at her with eyes full of hatred, and in a sorrowful silent way she began to ponder on the best way of removing herself for ever from his sight.

All through the week she sought for some excuse to offer him, but none came, and at last she determined upon telling him that she wished to return home. This was partly the truth, though to return to the old home, to her beloved Towers, was more, she thought, than she could endure. And if the marriage could be set aside, as she hoped and believed with a passionate misery that it could be, he would be the last to wish her *there*.

At length, one day towards evening, she summoned all her courage to her aid, and went to where he was, and standing at some little distance from him with folded hands tightly clasped, said tremulously:

"Fulke, may I go home?"

"*What?*" he said, thoroughly amazed. His face changed, and he regarded her with a searching scrutiny. "What is it you want?"

"To go home," she repeated, with a slight increase of nervousness this time.

He said nothing for a minute or two, spent principally in thinking out her words, and then with a half smile:

"Tired of it so soon?"

"Yes, I am tired," she said in a low voice. Her head was bent, and she was running her wedding-ring round and round her finger in a little sad, aimless way. The action

struck Wriothesley as being terribly significant. She was tired of the yacht, and tired of her marriage, and tired of her life. No wonder, too, poor child! She had made a sorry business of it from first to last! He felt heavy at heart because of his remorse. What right had he, in a mad freak, to wed this unthinking child and imagine she would be content to sail the silent seas with him, without a word of love from him, from day to day? Yet how soon she had tired! He could not help thinking her in a degree fickle.

"Well, you know I warned you," he said. "I told you a yachting expedition was the stupidest thing going for any one not devoted to a sea life, and for a young thing like you. Well, I can put in at Marseilles, you know, and put up the yacht there, and take you back, and——"

"Oh, no, no! I don't want to be any trouble to you, I have been *that* enough already. Burton will be able to take care of me." She looked at him eagerly for the first time since her entrance. "Then I may go?" she said.

"Of course you can do as you wish."

"And—and you will let me go alone with Burton?"

He laughed shortly.

"As I am such a bugbear to you, I certainly shall not add to your apparent unhappiness by thrusting myself upon you. Let Burton be your escort by all means; she is, beyond doubt, old enough to know how to take care of herself and you."

She seemed relieved at this, in spite of his sneering tone, and turned as if to leave him, then stopped, irresolute.

"Well, what is it?" asked he, not unkindly, though some sense of disappointment was irritating him. "There is something else you want to say?"

"There is."

She came back again softly, and drew her breath with some undue haste. Her eyes were not lowered now, however, but were fixed on his, with a glance that was piercing in its anxiety.

"I wish I had not married you," she said.

The words came so quietly and with such calm distinctness that at first he could hardly believe his ears. Then his brow contracted.

"That is a terrible thing to say. Are you quite sure you mean it?"

"Quite, quite sure." She drew closer to him. "Why should it be terrible?" she asked. "The—our marriage can be undone, can't it?"

It was impossible not to see with what overpowering anxiety she hung upon his answer. It seemed to be a matter of life or death to her, this question, as to whether she should or should not have to live the rest of her life as his wife. It was a scarcely flattering thought, and he resented it sorely. And could she indeed be so foolish, so ignorant as to have a doubt on the subject? He looked at the pale childish face uplifted to his, and saw that it was indeed so, but as he looked he misjudged the fear in the large eyes and failed to understand the misery that saddened the young lips.

"I am afraid I must tell you something you will not like to hear," he said very gently. "Our marriage cannot be undone. My wife you must remain until kindly death releases you from me, or me from you."

To her there seemed a world of regret in his voice—regret for that freedom he would fain have, but could not grasp, because of her. The sharp pain that stabbed her heart like a knife rose to her lips.

"Oh no! That *can't* be true," she cried in an agonized tone. "Oh, Fulke! *dear* Fulke, let me go. Why, think of it; it was only such a very, *very* little time ago. Only four weeks—*four*. And how shall I live all the long years before me? Oh, I will *not* believe it! See now," extending her hands passionately, "send me home—anywhere away from you, and forget that wedding-day, and let all things be as they were—four weeks ago."

"My dear child, you dream of impossibilities. I would gladly, for your own sake, tell you otherwise, if I could, but I cannot. The most secret marriage on earth is binding, and ours was done before all the world. The law will not permit us to separate—at least, so entirely as you desire."

"How can there be such a wicked law? It is unjust, horrible." She clasped her slender hands upon her breast.

"How am I to live," she cried, "with this weight for ever on my heart?"

"You, too, are unjust," said Wriothesley coldly. "I did not compel you to this marriage."

"No. That is it," said she quickly, lifting her lovely haggard eyes to his. "It was I who *made* you marry me. I entreated you; I begged you (oh! *how* could I have done it?) not to leave me behind—*alone*. And now—now," with such a depth of misery in the young voice as struck coldly to his heart, "I am doubly alone."

Remorse grew strong within him. A sudden awakening to the fact that he had sacrificed her to his own revenge, troubled him; and though justice had followed hard upon the heels of that deed and his revenge had recoiled upon himself, yet he could not hold himself free of blame in the matter. She had asked for meat, and he had given her a stone. How could he have thought that a child so reared and encompassed with love as she had been, would have rested satisfied with the barren existence he had given her?

"I cannot hear you speak like that," he said. "I, only, am in fault. I have done you so great a wrong that I know not how to ask your forgiveness. You were, you are, but a mere child, yet I took you at your word. I permitted you to marry a man nearly twelve years your senior. I feel I have spoiled your life."

"Is that how it seems to you?" she asked with indescribable sadness in look and tone.

"That is how it must seem."

"And *your* life?"

"As for that——" he said, and paused. Then hurriedly, "Feel no compunction about that. It is not in your power to spoil it."

No, truly; for it was a waste and ruined thing before ever he gave it into her possession.

"Are you sure—*quite* sure," she said, "that things could not be as they were before? That I could not be your friend again, instead of—your wife."

"You are my friend still, I hope," said he rather sharply; "or am I to understand that the love you once professed for me has turned to hatred?"

"Do not think that. It would not be the truth." She spoke slowly and painfully. It was with great difficulty she kept back her tears. How strange his manner was; almost it might seem as though he were pleading with her. But no—no: she would be foolish indeed to let herself imagine that.

"So you say. Yet you would gladly annul our marriage; and you are bent on leaving me?"

His tone was a question.

"I cannot bear to stay here," she said, nervously clasping and unclasping her fingers.

"Then you shall go," he decided abruptly. "The only question that now remains between us is—where? To The Towers?"

"Not there! Do not send me there, Fulke, I entreat you; be good to me about this. I could not live there, thinking, remembering——" She broke down at the very thought of it, and covered her face with her hands.

"Pray be composed," said he icily. "I am not sending you anywhere. You will be good enough to recollect, both now and in the future, that it is of your own express wish that you are leaving me."

"It is my own wish," she echoed faintly.

"If not to The Towers, to what other place? There is——"

"Could I not go somewhere—where nobody would know me—where I could be quite alone?"

"Certainly not."

"But why? You need not," eagerly, "be uneasy about me. I should not mind being quite by myself. I should," with a quick sigh, "like it."

"But I shouldn't. However distasteful the fact may be to you, it still remains that you are my wife. I shall not permit you to live in any way unsuited to the name and rank you bear. Put all romantic silly thoughts out of your head. The world knows you as Lady Wriothesley; and as Lady Wriothesley you will have to comport yourself." His voice was stern; his eyes flashed.

"I meant to do that wherever I was," replied she with a simple dignity that disarmed him, in spite of the anger

that was growing in his heart towards her. For such a wayward, incomprehensible girl, he had ruined every hope of happiness he knew.

"You are too young to live alone; but if you do not wish to go to The Towers, there is that place in Yorkshire. It is handsome and carelessly picturesque, they say, and, at all events, it is well kept up and ready for you at any moment. Will it suit you?" His manner was contemptuous, and she resented it.

"It will be better than this, I daresay," she said calmly, and with some spirit.

"So would that uncomfortable cottage you hinted at just now, I have no doubt; or anything, even worse. Any discomfort would be preferable to life with me. I have quite grasped the situation, I assure you, so you need not give me any more lessons in it. Well, shall it be the Yorkshire place, or——"

"Make no more plans. Yorkshire will do very well. It is all the same to me where I go," interrupted she wearily. She was longing to escape, to be by herself, that she might try to realize the fact that the end had indeed come. There had been, perhaps, underlying everything, a wild hope that he would *forbid* her leaving him, but how delusive it had proved! Far from forbidding, he was making speedy arrangements for her departure.

"Very good, I shall telegraph to-day to Ringwood, the name of your future home, and also to my cousin, Mrs. Verulam; you know her?"

"I have met her twice."

"Then you like her; every one does. I shall write to her to go up there and stay with you, and see to you generally."

"Oh *don't* do that," she entreated feverishly. "Indeed, I shall not want her; I shall not want any one. All I desire is to be alone." Poor child, how passionately she had fought against that loneliness that now she courted, only a month ago!

"I have told you that is impossible. Don't be silly, Marvel," he said impatiently, "you are too young, you have, indeed, proved yourself too childish, to be left to your own

devices; you do not know your own mind yet, even in your likes and dislikes." He spoke with meaning, and she cast one long reproachful glance at him. It was all she could trust herself to do. "If you do not like this plan of mine, suggest another. Will you go and stay with Mr. Bainbridge for awhile?"

"No; he would ask me questions," said she miserably.

"Then you see we must fall back on Mrs. Verulam. She is young, a widow, with no ties except a little girl of five or so, and she will, I know, be all that is kind to you. I should not suggest her, otherwise. What objection have you to her, as a friend, a chaperone, if, indeed, she will be good enough to give up her own arrangements for awhile?"

"She is a stranger," said Marvel, in a tone that was almost a whisper. Her poor little face grew white with agonized distress.

"My dear child, if I were to consider *that*," said he gently, "why, all the world is a stranger to you."

He paused, his own words fell back upon him, they were so fatally true. She was in the world and yet not *of* it; she understood it not at all. She was a stranger in a strange land! The wretchedness of it all touched him closely, though he was still curiously angry with her for her abandonment of him. How solitary, how forlorn she was. All were strangers to her, save him, her husband, and he could not doubt but that she would willingly part from him for ever.

"See here, Marvel," said he, putting out his own and taking her hand. "In this matter, at least, defer to my opinion. I believe I know what is best for you. *Try* Mrs. Verulam, and I think, in a very little while, you will learn to love her. In all other respects I have given you your own way. As you are not happy with me, I accede to your desire to try and seek happiness where I am not. I am going abroad, for years perhaps, but from time to time I shall let you or Mrs. Verulam hear of me. If by chance I get my quietus, so much the better for you; if not I daresay I shall get home some day. I shall so arrange with my agents that any money you may require over and above your allowance shall always be awaiting

you. That will do, I think; but if there is anything else, you can let me know—or if you would rather not write, tell Cicely Verulam. And now, child, do not distress yourself any more about it; it was an unfortunate piece of folly from the beginning, but you must promise me to try and make the best of it."

He was speaking very seriously. When he stopped, Marvel looked up at him, with her large eyes full of tears.

"I hope *you* will try," she said. There was something in her expression that puzzled him then and dwelt in his memory long afterwards. She drew her fingers out of his grasp and went quickly away.

CHAPTER XVII.

"But still her lips refused to say 'Farewell,'
For in that word—that fatal word—howe'er
We promise—hope—believe—there breathes despair."

THERE was little more said between them as to this strange parting, and the arrangements connected with it were completed in a week or so. Marvel continued to avoid him as much as possible, a matter in which he silently helped her, being in no wise desirous of seeing her; but when they did meet, it was to all outward seeming with as friendly a feeling as usual. At length the day arrived on which Marvel was to set out on her homeward journey, and just before leaving the yacht she went into the saloon, ostensibly to regain a book she had left there, but in reality to bid a silent farewell to a spot in which she had been for a few weeks, at least, comparatively happy. It was with an irrepressible start that she saw Wriothesley at the end of it. He came quickly forward; and by a supreme effort she recovered her self-possession. She was dressed in her travelling-gown, with a little soft becoming hat upon her head, and if rather paler than her wont, still showed no sign of the anguish she was suffering.

"The last moment has come, I suppose," said Wriothesley,

trying, but failing, to speak in his natural tone. "While you are away from me, you must try to get me back into the good graces, out of which, it seems, I have so wofully fallen. You will promise that, won't you?"

She was silent. She did not know how to answer him, and, besides, she was afraid that if she spoke she would also burst out crying. *That* was to be avoided at all hazards.

"What, not even that poor comfort is to be accorded me?" said he; "I am in greater disgrace, it seems, even than I thought." He was smiling, but there was no real amusement in the smile, and, in spite of himself, he was feeling singularly downhearted. Even by this child he was being abandoned. He had failed at all points. The world was out of joint with him, and the best of life was denied him. Love flew very near, circling round and round, yet though he stretched out his hands to it and called aloud, it would not come nigh him.

"And you, Marvel," he said, "who would have thought a baby like you could be so hard? But perhaps it is because you are one. Yet it is unlike you, too, to bear malice (whatever it may be about, which is a mystery to me) for so long. And, after all, *I* should be the one to bear it."

"You," she said suddenly, looking at him; "oh no."

"Why not? You remember how you once asked me, if husbands ever forsook their wives, and I told you no, but that wives sometimes had been known to leave their husbands? You did not believe me then, perhaps, but you will have to now. You see I spoke only the barren truth It is *you* who are leaving me."

"That is better," she said slowly, "than if I had waited for you to leave me."

"Was that so sure a thing?" He began to regard her curiously. What wild thoughts were running in her youthful head? He had not grasped the truth, that sorrow was quickly changing the child into the woman; and he was only doubtful as to whether it was pure fickleness or a childish whim that had formed her decision to return to England. "Come," he said, "tell me why you anticipated that."

"I cannot; I don't know," she said with nervous hesitation. At this moment of confusion it appeared to her as though she could not give a real reason for what she said.

"Then I may not know my crime?" said he, still in the half-jesting tone he had used all through.

"There is no crime, and—I *wish* you would not talk of it," she said in a fit of desperation. "This is the end of it all; and—*why* talk of it?"

"True," he said; "it is the end." He had grown quite grave, which indeed suited more his real feeling. "Besides, I do not think, after all, that there is any malice on your part, or any cause for it on mine, but only that you are tired of the dreary farce, you poor child!"

This entered her heart like a sharp thrust. Tired! That she was tired of him! An angry passion of regret, a terrible longing to tell him all, welled up within her, but she knew that she could not do it, and rebelliously enough, the longing died. No, she could not open her heart to one who considered her a burden and who had looked at her with hatred in his eyes.

"It is growing late," she said restlessly.

"In such mad haste to depart? Well, come then." Yet he hesitated for a moment—then, "Shall we say the real good-bye here," he said, "rather than at the railway station? It will be for a long time, remember—and—we *have* been friends."

But Marvel was still vehemently if silently angry, and with the anger was a numb pain that seemed to crush all the life out of her. She could not respond to the gentle reminder as she *must* have done had her mind been in a happier state. She felt frozen—dead to all kindly impulse, and with only the living remembrance that there was "that other" somewhere in some unknown place, where he fain would be.

"Good-bye," she answered in a low strained tone. Her eyes were on the ground. Still without looking at him, she extended one small hand. He took it, and drew her a little closer to him.

"Will you not kiss me, Marvel?"

She hesitated perceptibly, and then remembering all the near past, she felt that she could not do it.

"No," she said, "I do not want to kiss you ever again."

He changed colour, but he said nothing more. He pressed her hand very kindly and warmly, and then dropped it. Burton, the maid, came in fussily with a number of small parcels in her arms, and it was all over.

Presently they went ashore and he saw her into the train. He had tried to procure a private carriage for her, but she had not seemed to care about it, and indeed as some little foreign royalties had taken most of the carriages it would have been impossible. The station was quite blocked by them and their noisy attendants, but he managed to get Marvel very comfortably settled in spite of it all. She had her books, her basket of fruit, some lovely flowers, and the redoubtable Burton, who owned to six-and-thirty and looked fifty, which only shows how mistaken one might be in the age of any one.

There was an old lady on the opposite seat, and at the very farthest end of the carriage, comfortably nestled into the corner, a dark young man with a heavy moustache and eager piercing black eyes that seeemed to take in Marvel, Wriothesley, and the old lady in one glance. An instant later, he had taken in Burton also, and, an instant later still, the situation. That is in so far as it meant a parting between the lovely girl at the window and the tall tired-looking fellow on the platform.

Marvel did not notice him at all, and Wriothesley but indifferently; but Burton, who prided herself on being always wide-awake and never missing anything, decided immediately that he was English and a gentleman, and might be useful to them in little ways on their journey. Not that Burton required assistance either for herself or her mistress, as she was an old soldier and had "done the Continong"—as she was fond of reminding her fellow-servants many a time and oft—from "Boolong to Monty Carlo."

Wriothesley was taking a last survey round the carriage; that is, Marvel's portion of it.

"They haven't put in your rugs," he said hurriedly, and rushed off to see about them. Burton was at that moment struggling valiantly with a small bag that was being considerably sat upon by the other numerous valises and packages, and the dark young man, after following her efforts for some time with open interest, rose languidly and came to her assistance. Burton, pleased with the perspicuity of a while since that had assured her he was a gentleman, and which was now confirmed beyond a doubt, said, "Thank you, sir," very gratefully, and with as elaborate a curtsey as the catching of her knees by the opposite cushion would permit. Marvel, hearing her voice, raised her head, and thus met full the penetrating gaze that the dark young man was bestowing upon her whilst hastening to the help of her maid.

Burton having had the bag extricated for her was anxious to pass it on to her mistress, whose handkerchiefs and perfumes it held, and the stranger being the nearest to Marvel, and being the one standing up, naturally did it for her.

"Thank you," said Marvel in her turn, and the stranger, as if satisfied, bowed low and returned to his seat. He *was* satisfied. That low, sweet, melancholy voice exactly suited the exquisitely sweet and melancholy beauty of the girl before him. That she was married to the rather stern-looking man on the platform did not occur to him for a second.

Wriothesley came hurrying back, a porter carrying the rugs. The train was on the point of starting, and he glanced at Marvel to see if any sign of regret showed upon her passive features. She was calm and cold as ever. He could hardly believe it was the merry loving child of a month ago who sat there, apparently indifferent to the fact that she was bidding him a farewell that might be eternal. He was bitterly disappointed. He had not understood, of course, this freak of hers, but however brought about she might, he thought, at the very last have shown some feeling.

"Well, good-bye," he said, pressing her hand. "You are sure you are quite comfortable? Enough rugs? Take

care you make use of them, the night will be chilly Good-bye! Good-bye!"

The train moved off. She had said nothing. Almost at the last he glanced round and looked for her again. She was leaning out of the carriage window, her eyes fixed on him: there was a terrible despair on her young face, and he could see that the tears were running down her cheeks.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"To act with common sense, according to the moment, is the best wisdom I know; and the best philosophy, to do one's duties, take the world as it comes, submit respectfully to one's lot, and despise affectation."

"My good child, I wish, at all events, that you would not *study* to be absurd. Sooner or later you will have to show yourself to people, and why not sooner? You couldn't possibly have a more excellent opportunity than the present, yet you are bent on shirking it."

"That is scarcely it; I——"

"It is precisely it—'It,' in a nutshell. You haven't a solitary good excuse for your refusal to attend my dance. It is downright ungrateful of you after all the trouble I have taken to make your story good during the past twelve months. Oh! the tarradiddles I have told, the gentle hints I have flung abroad! I have been chanting your praises ceaselessly, and giving all sorts of pretty little reasons for your separation from your husband, though I confess it went desperately hard with me to avoid downright personal abuse of that precious Fulke of yours. Cousin or no cousin, in my opinion he deserves nothing short of the bastinado! However, I *did* abstain, and if only as a reward for so unexpected a mildness, you *might* promise me to be present on the 10th."

"Dearest Cicely, if you would only not ask me," said Marvel in a soft distressed tone, as she came out from behind the lace curtains of the window, where she had been sitting, to glance imploringly at Mrs. Verulam; and

as she now stood with the full glory of the autumn sunshine streaming down upon her, it was marvellous to mark the change that a bare year had wrought in her.

Then she was a child; now she was a woman. A girlish creature still, but with a face so earnest, so intelligent, so beautiful in the strictest sense of that word, that it was an exquisite pleasure only to look upon her.

Yet there were lines of sadness about the mobile mouth, and a mournful light in the large sweet eyes. She had thought out many things and learned much that was sorrowful, because inevitable, since her parting with Wriothesley, although the world, as represented by society, was as yet a sealed book to her.

She had gone straight to Ringwood, according to her husband's desire, where Mrs. Verulam had received her, having, indeed, thrown over several engagements to do so. She was charmed with the pretty desolate little bride, the poor little returned goods as she called her, and as she learned to like her better and better, indignant with Wriothesley because of his treatment of her. She had a pretty accurate guess of how matters stood from the beginning, and a little judicious questioning had extracted enough from Marvel to make her half knowledge a whole. She wrote Wriothesley a long letter, that was a perfect masterpiece of elegant vituperation, and took to petting Marvel as though she were an invalid of a very advanced stage.

But she had her own duties to perform, and guests, previously invited, to entertain, so that most of the months spent in that cold northern home were solitary ones to Marvel; and sad as solitary. Now and again they were broken into by Mrs. Verulam's flying visits, who was always very good to her, and of whom the girl was wonderfully fond; but for all that, too much time was given her in which to brood ceaselessly over her wrongs, and her undying regrets.

So thought Mrs. Verulam on her last visit, and at the beginning of the spring she had asserted her authority as being somewhat of a guardian to the young countess, and carried her away *nolens volens* from that bleak castle of

sighs, down southward to her own smaller but far cosier home. And after awhile Marvel had learned to be grateful for the change. Here little time was given her for morbid reflections, and after a bit some of the cruel shrinking from contact with those around her wore away.

Still, the world, with her, was always out of gear. There was something wrong always. Her sun was ever under a cloud. Each morning she awoke with a sense of dull pain, and a vague knowledge that her life was wanting in those fuller rounds of grief and joy that to others made existence tolerable.

Mrs. Verulam would fain have carried her off with her for a season in town, eager to exhibit her fresh uncommon beauty to an admiring crowd, but Marvel would not listen to such a proposition. She grew so pale, so distressed, at the very thought of it, that Mrs. Verulam, though always unwilling to give up a point, abstained from further pressing, and enjoyed her two months in town without her.

And Marvel missed her; not only her but the little daughter, the saucy, merry, thoughtful child, who was Mrs. Verulam's sole happy gain from a most distasteful marriage. Her husband, the Hon. Moore Verulam, was dead, however, and the child Lulu was left, so there was a good deal to be thankful for, as his wife would say sometimes, in a soft plaintive way; and Verulam, whose prefix was the sole honourable thing about him, had left her, without intending it, a rich woman. She was a pretty woman too, of about seven-and-twenty, with merry gray eyes, a rather mutinous mouth, and a nose that had the faintest, sauciest inclination upwards. The child Lulu was the very image of her, and the idol of her rather impulsive heart.

She was now seriously ambitious of carrying a point to which she had almost pledged herself. When in town she had spoken so much of Lady Wriothesley's personal charms, and so mysteriously of her separation from her husband, that every one was eagerly desirous of being made more immediately acquainted with her. Mrs. Verulam had asked down a good many for the twelfth. Her brother-in-law, Lord Verulam, who was an enthusiastic sportsman, and his

wife, amongst others, and she had half promised them that this Marvel of marvels should also be one of the guests. All were to arrive about the ninth, and as there was an occasion to entertain a newly-made bride, Mrs. Verulam had arranged to give a ball on the tenth. This would give the sportsmen the whole of the eleventh on which to rest, and after that the deluge—for the birds. But just now her programme was a little spoiled, because of the fact that Marvel had steadily declined to show herself either at the dance or in the house during the stay of her party. She would go back to Ringwood, she said gently, until Mrs. Verulam was alone again, or wanted her. But Mrs. Verulam this time, in spite of pale looks and distressed tones, pressed her sore.

"If you would only not ask me," said Marvel.

"But I shall ask you; always, and all day long, until I make your life a burden to you. Come, now, Marvel, you are such a very good child that I think you ought to consider how wrong it is of you to fight against those in authority. And really if you come to look into it, I stand as a mother to you."

Marvel laughed.

"A pretty mother you'd make me," she said, with mock contempt. "Why, I could put you in my pocket!" Mrs. Verulam was a little thing, fairy-like, and mischievous; Marvel, tall and slender.

"Is that a deferential speech? I shall have to send Lulu away. Go, darling, into the garden, until Marvel ceases to be naughty. Now, a word with you, Madame Wriothesley. You scoff at the thought of my treating you as a child, yet I firmly believe that that baby who has just gone out has twice your common sense."

"And all this," said Marvel, throwing out her hands expressively, "because——"

"You must let me give you your proper position in society. Dearest girl, be reasonable. You are not a nobody; you are a countess. Do you think it is your duty to hide yourself, as though—as though—well, as though you were ashamed of something?"

She said this rather quickly, as if a trifle ashamed of

herself for thus working on the other's tenderest point; yet she meant well by Marvel always.

"That is it," said Marvel in a low voice. "I *am* ashamed. What woman amongst them all is situated as I am? A wife, yet no wife. Uncared for, unloved. A burden in her husband's sight. No. I *cannot* meet your friends."

"If you are unloved—and oh, Marvel, looking at you it is hard to realize that!—do not imagine you are the only one in the world in that predicament."

"But how account for a separation five weeks after our marriage? Marriage! what a mockery it all was," she said with a sudden indrawing of her breath.

"I have accounted for everything. You were not well. Sea-air disagreed with you. Wriothesley had to go on business to Jamaica. I hope to goodness he *will* go to Jamaica before he comes back or it will be rather awkward for *me*. Nigger rising; any amount of property there to be looked after. He *has* an acre or two, I believe—a corner somewhere. Still detained in spite of longing to return, &c. I've written it all to Wriothesley, so if he doesn't act up to my manifesto, he's a worse man than I think him, which is saying a lot."

"I wish you wouldn't speak of him like that," said Marvel flushing and then paling.

"Well, I won't. I'll speak of him as being the possessor of all the cardinal virtues if you will only consent to be one of my guests on the 10th. Hide yourself, up to that if you will (there is always influenza and the useful headache, the gods be thanked!), but *do* say you will appear afterwards."

"You make it very hard for me," said Marvel, tears filling her eyes. "You know how I hate to disappoint you in any way; you, who have been so good to me."

"Yes, haven't I," said she laughing, "and this is for your good too, you brainless person. Pull yourself together now, and say 'yes' to me."

"I shouldn't know what to say to them," nervously, "or they to me. It would be but a poor experiment, and you would regret it afterwards. I have not been accustomed to fashionable people, and," mournfully, "you know I am not happy."

"I know that you are naturally as merry as a cricket and that you only want a little rousing to return to your normal state. As to your behaviour, all you have to do is to talk to them as you talk to me; to look your loveliest; to condescend a little to those of lower estate (in the way of beauty), and the day is yours."

"A simple sounding thing, but oh! how difficult! I should fail, Cicely, and then again, I have never been at a ball."

Was there a relenting in this speech, a sudden youthful longing for the fleshly joys hitherto unknown to her. Mrs. Verulam's heart leaped in her side with a sudden access of hope.

"As to that," she said, "the rules are simpler still. You order a decent gown from Worth. You put on the Wriothesley diamonds, and there you are. Speak, or be silent; dance, or look on as you will, I still promise you, with such a face as yours, you will astonish the natives. Is that enough flattery for one day?" Then changing her tone to one of earnest entreaty: "Darling Marvel! It is because I love you I thus adjure you. When Fulke comes home do you think he will like to find you unknown, unthought of—of no account? Rather, I think, would he be pleased to know you esteemed and admired. And have you no pride? or if so, where is it? Is it nothing to you that he should find *her*, whom he had treated as an insignificant child, a leader, an acknowledged centre in the crowd?"

Her words seemed to burn into Marvel. She was far too simple-minded, too pure, for them to do her any harm, but a longing to distinguish herself, to raise herself in his eyes, to show him that she was in reality more than the "insignificant child" took possession of her. Her colour changed. Her eyes took a deeper shade. She turned suddenly to Mrs. Verulam and said in a soft but agitated tone:

"It shall be as you wish. You shall order me a gown, and I will appear at your dance; but not until then. I could not. Will that satisfy you?"

"Quite. Entirely. Oh! Marvel, I am so glad." She threw her arms round Marvel's neck and kissed her. To do

her justice she was far more sincerely glad for Marvel's sake than for her own that the girl had at last consented to come out of her shell. Then a sudden thought struck her and frightened her:

"I hope you will like the people I have asked," she said, "but of course you need not talk to everybody; and I unfortunately gave *carte blanche* to my sister-in-law, Lady Lucy, to bring any one she chose, and she is bringing Mrs. Scarlett."

"Yes," said Marvel. She waited, unaware that Mrs. Verulam's steady gaze at her meant anything, and then: "Who is Mrs. Scarlett, and why shouldn't she bring her?"

"Well, because I don't happen to care for her," said Mrs. Verulam somewhat confusedly. "But she has been invited in my name, and there is no getting out of it. But I must say I think Lady Lucy is the most troublesome woman I know."

"Except me," said Marvel smiling. "But this poor Mrs. Scarlett, whom you so detest. What of her? Who is she?"

"*The* fashionable beauty even now, though a year has elapsed since she first dawned upon an appreciative London audience, and—*a wretch*," said Mrs. Verulam, quite carried away by such a paltry thing as honest feeling, as she looked at Marvel's gentle, spiritual face.

CHAPTER XIX.

"Shall not thy vision vex me alive and dead?"

* * * * *

"Every spirit as it is most pure,
And hath in it the more of heavenly light,
So it the fairer body doth procure,
To habit in; * . . . ."

THE fiddles had been tuned to their most correct pitch, and were playing away valiantly. The rooms were growing every moment more and more crowded. Through

all the open windows came the sweet perfume of the living flowers without, to mingle with that of the dying ones within. Through the close velvety darkness one's eyes could pierce to where starlike lights hung suspended on tree and shrub.

The lord-lieutenant of the county, who was a real live duke and a bachelor to boot (though an old one) had arrived half-an-hour ago, yet still the house party—more particularly Lady Lucy Verulam openly, and Mrs. Scarlett secretly—were on the very tiptoe of expectation.

Would she come? Would she not come? That was the enthralling question of the hour. Lady Lucy almost lost her place in her conversation with the duke, so absorbed was she in it. She dearly loved excitement in any form, and here was a chance of seeing the downfall of her dear friend Mrs. Scarlett, who, up to this had reigned queen-paramount of beauty. If all that Cicely had said was true! But who could be depended upon? She rather feared that Marvel would fall far below the standard raised.

Mrs. Scarlett, in an exquisite gown of cardinal brocade, looked like a spot of blood in the assembly. She was sitting as usual—she seldom stood—surrounded by a group of admirers. She was as handsome as ever in her own peculiar style, yet one could not fail to see that the year that had gone by had told upon her. Her colour was a little higher, her lashes blacker, but all the art in the world could not hide the lines that physical pain had drawn round the thin but exquisitely formed lips. She had been threatened by half-a-dozen young beauties during the past season, all lovely enough (said rumour) to put her in the shade, yet, when confronted with her—though charming girls in every way—it had been seen that they were nowhere, when foolishly brought beneath the glare of her charms, and had dropped out of notice after a while.

But to-night some strange foreboding made her heart chill. All along her instinct had warned her against that *protégée* of Lady Mary Craven's. She half dreaded this girl as a possible rival, and wholly hated her as the being who had stepped in and won from her her lawful prey. If that old man Dawtry had not been gathered, when even over-ripe,

to his fathers, Wriothesley could easily have been let go, but as he *had* joined the majority, it was a bitter thing to her that Wriothesley—her *pis-aller*—had been put out of her reach by a child, a mere chit of a thing of whom he had proved himself tired in five or six weeks. She had heard all Mrs. Verulam's kindly explanations of course, as to the cause of Wriothesley's separation from his wife, but she had carefully believed none of them.

She lay back in her chair as she thought of it now, and smiled to herself insolently. *She!* afraid of a fool, a failure such as that! The boasted beauty of her must be a poor thing, indeed, if a man could tire of it in five short weeks. All through her meditations she was throwing a word here and there to her courtiers, but her mind was with the girl who had stolen Wriothesley from her, and spoiled her chance of being a countess, and she was glad in her soul that Marvel had been openly slighted by the man she had married, and made of no account by him. She told herself she scoffed at and derided such charms as hers—charms that could take and yet not hold a man, and——

Marvel had entered the room! A tall, slender, stately creature, clad all in purest white, with diamonds glittering on neck and arms, and gleaming warmly amongst the soft masses of her lovely hair. Mrs. Verulam stood beside her, and together they advanced up the room; stopping now and again as the former paused to introduce Lady Wriothesley to one or two people of importance.

Marvel was looking intensely lovely, and showed the terrible nervousness that was consuming her only by the increasing pallor that marked her face. She was drawing near the corner where Mrs. Scarlett sat, and a little hush had fallen upon the people there. Mrs. Scarlett herself was leaning forward, forgetful of everything but her anxiety to get a nearer view of the girl, of whose face she had caught a faint glimpse between the moving forms of the dancers. Then there was a moment when she stood clearly revealed, and Mrs. Scarlett, as she saw her, grew curiously still, her breath coming from her like a long-drawn sigh.

Some awful fascination kept her eyes fixed on Marvel—and then—what was it? Was she going to faint? She

swayed a little and then recovered herself with a sharp effort. That lovely face over there. *What other face did it resemble?* What horrible thing was this that rose before her, and cried aloud, "At last—at last—at last!" in tones that would not be stifled. Was all this madness?—or what?

She leaned farther forward and positively glared at the girl standing, pale and tranquil, and unconscious, until one near her remarked the intensity of her gaze, and lightly touched her on the arm with a lighter jest. She recovered herself then, but her face remained pallid as the dead. Thus fair and tranquil had that figure stood out from the surrounding darkness in her dream. It all came back to her now! and with it a strange sense that fate was crushing down upon her, that seemed to paralyze her limbs; she made a vehement struggle to overcome her emotion, and after a while succeeded. But the weary pain in her side that was beginning to torment her day and night grew stronger because of this effort, and she leant languidly back in her chair, hardly deigning to answer those who spoke to her.

Marvel unconsciously was creating a sensation. Her strange romantic wedding was, of course, town-talk, and now everybody, more or less, was discussing her merits and demerits. So this was the little waif, the stray that Wriothesley had married! No one knew who she was. A mere nobody, nay, in all probability, worse than a nobody. Of course, that sort of thing never did. Here was she now irretrievably bound to him, but where was he? It was one of the most unfortunate things that had happened to a young man of position for a very long time. All this from the women. The men were more lenient; they could see, and acknowledge, that at all events she was unspeakably beautiful, and allowed there was every excuse for even so rash a marriage. But how account for his long absence? That puzzled them, even more than the women, who were not so willing to admit her charms.

Mrs. Verulam was faithful to Marvel, and kept her beside her without appearing to do so, knowing well how unstrung she was, and how unequal to the carrying on of light conversation with those around her in her present mood. But after a while she began to be besieged with entreaties for

an introduction to Lady Wriothesley, who already, even at this early stage of her appearance in public, was becoming the rage. Lady Lucy Verulam, too, was delighted with her. This was not one of Cicely's absurd swans who invariably turned out geese, but a real, *bonâ fide rara avis*. Unquestionably she would be *the* new beauty, and as it is always politic to be on good terms with a rising star, she made herself amazingly civil.

But presently Marvel moved away to get through a square dance with the duke, feeling secretly shy and uncertain, and yet half longing to join the gay dancing circle without, and Mrs. Verulam, finding herself alone, turned instantly upon her sister-in-law, whom she had not had the chance of scolding before.

"My dear Lucy, how *could* you have asked Mrs. Scarlett," she said in a highly aggrieved tone.

"My dear creature, why not?" returned Lady Lucy, a large handsome florid woman of about forty-five, whose manners, although she was the third daughter of a marquis, could scarcely be termed her strong point. She was not exactly ill-natured, but she was capable of doing or saying a hurtful thing now and again.

"When I gave you leave to ask here whom you would to please yourself, I certainly did think you would have remembered that Lady Wriothesley was likely to be one of my party."

"Well, so I did. I recollected it perfectly; that was why I asked Leonie. In the dull season, when the men think of nothing but their bags, any little excitement becomes desirable; and a meeting between those two *ought* to have something of the tragic in it. By-the-by, it hasn't come off yet, has it? I should be sorry to miss it."

"I wish you would arrange for your little excitements to come off in somebody else's house. I shall not have Marvel subjected to anything of the kind. She is not of the common clay one meets always, and I don't care to see her annoyed. Considering all that has occurred between Mrs. Scarlett and Wriothesley, her being here now is awkward, to say the least of it."

"Nonsense. If every woman of your acquaintance

objected to meet the other woman with whom her husband is, or was, in love, there would be precious little visiting going on anywhere, I take it. And, besides, Lady Wriothesley, so far as I can judge, is far from stupid."

"You judge very correctly. She is, on the contrary, cleverer than most, and has been educated to quite a pitch. She has an exquisite voice—not powerful, but purest music all through. With regard to Mrs. Scarlett, however, your argument about others' feelings is nothing to me. I care only that Marvel should not be hurt, and that woman is capable of anything."

"Short of suicide," said Lady Lucy laughing. "She'll never hurt herself. I say, *did* you see the glance she cast at the little one as she came up the room? It was a play in itself—a play of feature certainly. Already she could eat her, seeing herself virtually dethroned. Rawdon told me she was frantic when she first heard of Wriothesley's marriage. It appears she knew nothing of it until *after* the old duke's death, which must have piled up the agony a bit. To be a countess would have been a come down, but it would have been better than the nothing that it now is." She chuckled to herself again, and then: "I wonder how she escaped hearing of it?"

"Nobody heard of it until weeks had gone by. It was a hurried affair, and their starting in the yacht directly after—the very afternoon of the wedding in fact—made Wriothesley forget to put it in the papers. It must have been rather a shock to her; but I really grudge her nothing. She behaved shamefully to him."

"Kindly, *I* think," said Lady Lucy, with a faint yawn. "She would have made a truly odious cousin, though a possible companion. I for one should never have forgiven her," with a shrug of her ample shoulders that signified distaste for Mrs. Scarlett, though she professed herself to be the latter's bosom friend. "She can be as nasty as any one I know when the moment suits her. By-the-by, does Marvel know about her and Wriothesley?"

"I am quite certain she does not."

"That is bad for *your* friend," said Lady Lucy. "Leonie is not likely to let her go without a sting or two."

"That is why I am so distressed at her being here. Now she has come I am of course bound to be civil, but I warn you I shall defend Marvel at all risks; and I agree with you that that woman is not to be trusted; she will not respect that poor child's innocence, but will say something that will explain the whole unhappy story to her."

"And so put her in 'a tender taking'? Well, I shouldn't wonder;" said Lady Lucy. "I know the languid Leonie as well as most, and it seems to me a likely thing that she should seek to make that child's life a burden to her, if only for the sake of dear revenge. Therefore, a word to you, Cicely; forestall Mrs. Scarlett in her communication—I mean, have the *first* of it; in that way you will take the edge off the knife. Tell Marvel yourself ot that old attachment of Wriothesley's—which I rather fancy is still alive—and put her on her guard. That is the truest friendship you can show her. And positively I begin to think she has bewitched even me, case-hardened as I am, with those pretty looks of hers, or I should not be now lecturing you as to her defence. You will tell her?"

"I really—I—that is——Well, I really don't believe I could," said Mrs. Verulam, as if half ashamed of this sudden weakness.

"Well, if you can't, I warn you that presently there will be a most unlovely row somewhere," said her sister-in-law with lazy warmth. "To be as old as you, Cicely, and so wanting in strength of mind, is deplorable."

"I'm not so *very* old, if it comes to that," said Mrs. Verulam; "and I need not be put on the shelf altogether simply because I am the widow of a man whom——"

"You detested, even as heartily as I did," concluded Lady Lucy agreeably. "Quite so. You are not on the shelf at all, my dear, and I shall probably hear of your second marriage some day; but in the meantime do your duty and warn your pretty friend of what lies in her path. I d do it; but Leonie might take it badly if she heard of it, and as yet she is useful to me: she fills my rooms. By-and-by Marvel will fill them better and then——"

"You are the most candidly false person I ever met,' said Cicely, looking at her with something akin to admira.

tion. "When thinking of you, I always feel you would sell *me* for sixpence, if the gaining of that small coin would do you any good."

"You are candidly *frank*," said Lady Lucy smiling—she was quite unmoved by the other's outburst—"which is another way of saying you are abominably rude; but I prefer that sort of thing to—the other. Sweets pall, especially when you know they are hollow. And after all I *wouldn't* sell you, Cicely, for anything less than—a crown." She laughed in the soft fat way that belongs to fat women. "A sixpence is a paltry thing, and fetches very little. You will speak to Marvel?"

"I shall have to think about it first."

"Think hard, then, until you come to my view of the case; though one shouldn't be quite down on Leonie at present. Did you hear that she is ill—suffering?"

"No."

"She is. Something internal. I worried that much out of old Grainger when he came to see if the pimple on the baby's nose meant scarlatina or small pox. It was neither, as it happened. Yes, she is really ill; but she won't give in to it. Something about the heart, I imagine, that may carry her off at any moment."

"How dreadful!" said Mrs. Verulam; but she did not seem to care much. She had begun to think again of Marvel. Was she alone, or distressed, or in want of her? She was astonished at her own affection for the girl, and started off in search of her.

CHAPTER XX.

"Of dreams now dwelling where dead roses dwell."

At one of the doorways she encountered a tall, lanky man of about thirty-five, with a thoughtful, kindly face, who ventured to lay his hand upon her lovely naked arm.

"Whither away so fast?" said he. He looked at her. He had a most genial smile. "Surely you can spare me a second to bid me welcome, though late in the day?"

"Nay, early," retorted she, pointing to a clock in the hall outside, whose hands stood at two; "but you are welcome, nevertheless, at any hour, any time."

Her expressive face had grown very bright, and a little gleam had come into her eyes.

"I never thought you could have come; that card I sent anticipated no such reply as your presence here."

"I should have stayed away, it seems to me. Yet it is unlike you to be so chary of gracious words. How have I offended your majesty?"

"How have you gratified me, rather! I believed you in Rotterdam, yet here you are, and you know all old friends are dear to me."

"A detestable remark! What am I among so many? Rotterdam is not a spot to hanker after, yet truly I would wish myself there now."

"Great men must be forgiven their little fibs," said Mrs. Verulam saucily, "and since the papers have been administering to you doses of flattery on your scientific researches, one hardly dares to question any word of yours; yet I am loath to believe you would rather be in Rotterdam than here."

"Yet you know why I went to Rotterdam?"

"You can be dull as well as the most of them, in spite of your learning," said she pettishly, and turned away; but he followed her.

"There, I was wrong. If we can't be more, let us at least be friends," said he with a resignation of himself to circumstances that somehow nettled her. Just at this moment, however, a little man with a bald appearance and a humorous eye came up to her.

"I've been looking for you everywhere," he said. "How d'ye do, Townshend. I thought you had gone off to the happy hunting grounds of Northern America with Wriothesley and that lot. Oh! by the way, Mrs. Verulam, what did you mean by hiding away Lady Wriothesley from us all this time, and then letting her burst upon us without a word of warning. I daresay it is actionable. Fellows like me, with weak action of the heart, might go off at any moment if subjected to a sudden shock, and such charms as hers!

Have you seen her, Townshend? This new beauty who will eclipse all other lights? No? Steel your heart, then, for there is something very special about her I can tell you."

"My heart is cased with iron bands," said Sir George, and with a slight salutation to Mrs. Verulam he turned aside. So did Mrs. Verulam instantly, in the other direction.

"I say, don't all go at once," exclaimed Mr. Kitts in an aggrieved tone. "Here I thought I was surely in for a little sensible conversation with you two, and just as I begin you both give me the cold shoulder. It isn't nice, you know. 'Tisn't kind. You are a very Solomon amongst men, we all know, Townshend, but to turn your back on a friend, however great a poor fool he may be, shows no wisdom. And you, Mrs. Verulam, are you looking for anything?"

"I'm looking for my new baby," said Mrs. Verulam laughing, "that same paragon of beauty you were lauding to the skies just now. She doesn't know her way about quite yet, and I'm bound to look after her. She is only just out of her long clothes, and can't run alone without my help. Hitherto she has resided on an immaculate solitude, in the bosom of a deserted village. This is her first insight into a frivolous society such as we live and breathe, and have our being in; her first glimpse at the 'lights o' London,' as represented by—you and Sir George."

"Consider me withered!" said Mr. Kitts in a low despondent tone. "And yet how have I deserved this! And to put me before Sir George! There was a depth of cruelty in that hardly to be fathomed."

"Never mind," said Sir George, who was annoyed by the little mocking glance she had cast at him, "I believe, of we two, you are by far the cleverer man."

He pointed this remark by a look at Mrs. Verulam, warm with reproach, and then left her.

"It's such a mistake to eat things that don't agree with one, isn't it?" said Mr. Kitts, *a propos* of nothing apparently, but Mrs. Verulam wisely refrained from asking his meaning.

Meantime Marvel, who had been dancing with other and younger people than the duke, had stopped near a conser-

vatory door to collect her breath and her thoughts. She was amazed at her own sensations. Only that morning she had looked with horror on the thought of being dragged from her dear seclusion to the warm lights of notoriety. Yet now, she was—yes, she could not deny it, enjoying herself intensely. She had let herself go, as it were, and with all the ardour of youth was entering into her dances with a *verve*, a delight, that lit her lovely eyes and made her ten times more charming than when she entered the room an hour ago.

Now, every one was talking of her. Lady Lucy was going about making noisy sonnets in her praise, and many of the women, following her lead, some from prudential motives and some from honest conviction, were saying all sorts of pretty things about her.

The heroine of all this admiration was at the present moment feeling a little pleasant fatigue. She moved backwards into the conservatory near, and listened with an appreciative ear to the suggestion of her partner that he should go and get her an ice. He sped swiftly on his errand, and Marvel moved a little farther inland to find some seat whereon to rest herself.

A soft and downy couch attracted her eye; she went quickly towards it, but half way there she saw something that attracted her even more. This was a tall dark young man with eager eyes, who was leaning against a wall.

As she saw him she started slightly, but perceptibly. Where had she last seen him? What past picture did his presence conjure up? She was here, it was true, in sober England, and yet she was there too, far away in the sunny south, gazing out of the window of a railway carriage with all her heart in her eyes. Once again Wriothesley stood before her, as on that day when they had parted. He was talking to her kindly words that showed her how real was his anxiety for her comfort on the journey that would separate her from him, perhaps for ever. All round her were the flowers, the fruit, the books he had procured for her to beguile the time; evidences, each of them of the care he had lavished on her. She could hear once more his words of gentle inquiry, could see his friendly smile;

all these indeed he had given her—all, save that one thing which she alone craved—his love!

Tears dimmed her eyes as she looked at the stranger, who had called to life these remembrances that were better dead. Surely, it was he who had been in the carriage with her on that eventful day, and who, during the short time he had travelled with her, had been so courteously desirous of saving her from every small discomfort. An impulsive desire to speak to him was strong within her, but she controlled it, *why* she hardly knew, and with a rather nervous bearing seated herself on the lounge she had first looked at. As she did so her fan fell from her hand, and rattled upon the stone flooring. The young man came swiftly, yet leisurely, forward, picked it up, and with a low bow presented it to her. As she took it their eyes met, and there was so much humble entreaty, mingled with so flattering a deference in his whole air, that Marvel gave room to the natural graciousness within her, and determined at all risks to give him a gentle word.

"Thank you. It is not the first service you have done me, I think," she said very shyly and very sweetly.

His whole manner changed at once, and the dark beauty of his face brightened with a smile.

"How good of you," he exclaimed softly, yet eagerly, "to remember me—to acknowledge me! It is more than I dared hope for. I have dreamt of such a moment as this in all the past measureless year, but how seldom dreams so bright are realized."

There was a suppressed vehemence in his manner that should have warned her, but she was so ignorant of love-making in all its variations that she missed the core of his speech. So he seemed only kind. A little extravagantly so, considering how small had been her acquaintance with him, but still kind.

"I wonder you remembered me," she said smiling at him, though still somewhat shy in look and tone. "They tell me this last year has greatly changed me."

"They tell you true. Yet I should have known you anywhere. You are changed in so far, that——" He hesitated as if finding a difficulty in going on with those large limpid

eyes fixed on his. A florid compliment to the owner of those clear orbs would be almost a cruelty. "You are staying here?" he asked with some abruptness.

"Yes, for a time at least. Mrs. Verulam is my cousin." By marriage she did not say. She never thought of her in that wise.

"And my very good friend. We have known each other for years, as my home is only two miles from this. If you ask her about me," smiling, "she will vouch for me."

"Not if I do not give her your name," with a swift glance.

"A thousand pardons," said he. "My name is Savage."

"Mr. Savage?"

"Yes. I've a father still somewhere," said he carelessly. She was a little shocked by his tone, which contained a distinct sneer, and she wondered vaguely if he wished his father dead because of the title he would evidently inherit, or if he and his father were on such bad terms that no love was to be felt or expressed between them. Oh! if only *she* had had a father! Instinctively she raised her hand and felt for the battered locket she always wore, hidden in her breast, and wondered in a vague sad manner if such a tender name could be given by her to the handsome face within it. Lost in this waking dream she half forgot the man beside her until a direct question from him recalled her to the present.

"I can recollect how sorry you were to leave your friend that day——" he was saying, with deliberate intent to learn. "He *was* a friend?"

He asked the question with as much unconcern as he could muster, yet he was curiously anxious to learn if the man who had parted from her so easily, and for whom she had felt so sincere a regret, was her friend or her brother or what. That he could be the husband of the childish creature who sat weeping on the opposite seat had never entered his head.

"A friend? I hope so," replied she slowly. The question startled her a little. *Was* Wriothesley her friend? In the old sweet days he had been her best, her truest friend, but after that sad mistaken marriage—— She didn't

know. She could only "hope" so now—she was no longer sure.

"Have you seen him since?" asked Savage in the same deliberate way. He knew he was unpardonably rude, but he could not conquer his devouring longing to know.

"Lord Wriothesley? No. He has been abroad ever since," said she simply, if a little curtly. It was always an embarrassment to her to speak of him, though the mention of his name suggested nothing to Savage, who had been too long out of England himself to be *au fait* with any of the current gossip; and had in fact only returned to it about a week ago.

"It was a strange fancy, perhaps, of mine," said he, looking straight at her, and with a rather regulated smile, "but on that day when I saw the parting between you, I imagined he was your brother. One forms ideas of that sort, you know, almost unconsciously. I was wrong?"

"Yes. I am not his sister." She hesitated, as if she would have said more, but hardly knew how to frame her sentence. He was too much absorbed with the bafflement to notice the shade of trouble that crossed her face. Was he *never* to know?

"I should of course have known that. No faintest likeness was there, to help me to my false belief. Yet, though older than you in a great degree, he was yet not old enough to be your father or your uncle. That was how the mistake arose I daresay. I fixed on brother, very elder brother of course, as the real thing; but it seems he was not that?"

He felt that he was daring a good deal, even her contempt, but the overpowering desire to settle this matter once for all, drove him on.

"Lord Wriothesley is my husband!" replied she, with a certain gentle dignity, though her face grew white.

Savage stared at her, forgetful of all decorum. Her husband! She was married! This innocent-eyed child! Good heavens, what a blank ending to as real a romance as was ever commenced! A sense of general loss, a vacuum everywhere, oppressed him for one deadly moment, and then he knew he should have to rouse himself and take

things as they were, not as they should be if he had had the regulating of circumstances.

"He is to be envied," he said with a little society smile and bow, and then Lady Wriothesley's partner arriving with the promised ice, he bowed again, and slipped away into an adjoining room, where he came face to face with his hostess.

"Seen a ghost, Nigel?" asked she somewhat caustically; she was not in her prettiest mood. "You look dazed enough for anything. But—I'm sorry to spoil the idea—there isn't anything half so respectable as a 'walking gentleman' in *this* house."

"It was a lady," said he with a partially developed smile.

"Mrs. Scarlett? She is the nearest thing I know to it, to-night."

"Wrong. My spirit is of a more heavenly type. I did not know you had a cousin, and *such* a cousin, as Lady Wriothesley!"

"Is that it?" said she. "But I forbid raptures. She is forbidden goods, you know—sour grapes. And she is not my cousin after all."

"She *said* she was——"

"And such lips could utter no untruth! Well, you are only just there," relenting as she thought of Marvel; "they could not. Her husband is my cousin, not she, worse luck for me. But I suppose *she* regards it as being all the same thing; it is, I feel, very good of her. No one could object to her as a cousin, could they? You wouldn't?"

"Yes, I should. I should object to her in any light but one," said he. His laugh was so curious that Mrs. Verulam looked closely at him.

"I hope you aren't going to be nonsensical," she said. "If you are, I may as well say at once that Marvel is not a person to be regarded in *that* light. You had better go abroad again, or fling yourself into the nearest river, if you think you have lost your heart to her."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I was thinking of the river just now," said he. "But I am such an unfortunately good swimmer, and one might strike out perhaps, one doesn't

know. As to the going abroad theory, that never holds water. One's thoughts and memories can go abroad too."

"What am I to understand by all that?"

"That I am coming to see you to-morrow."

"Well, your blood be on your own head," said she. "When you are as miserable as man can be, don't blame me."

"What am I to understand by *that?*" demanded he in turn.

"That Lady Wriothesley is that foolish thing, a woman in love with her own husband!"

But Savage had seen the sudden pallor that had overspread the young face when Marvel had spoken of Wriothesley as her husband, and had drawn therefrom his own conclusions. Later on, too, he dropped a casual question to an old acquaintance of his, a colonel of dragoons and an inveterate gossip, who in reply put him in possession of a highly-coloured version of the "Wriothesley affair," as he, the colonel, called it—a version that proved those already formed conclusions only too correct!

CHAPTER XXI.

"When grief about me clings
Through fortune's fit or fume of jealousy,
Your sweet kind eye beats down her threatenings
As wind doth smoke."

It was very late that night, or rather early in the morning, when Mrs. Verulam pushed open the door of Marvel's room, and with a soft little apology entered it.

"Not in bed yet, I hope? No? Then I *am* in luck. I have so many things to think about that I cannot do it all by myself, and so I have come to you. I was so afraid I should find you in the middle of your beauty sleep—not that you want it, you should make over such unnecessary things to those who really require them—a sort of national bequest! I tried my best to come sooner, sparing neither

hints nor yawns, but Lucy is a person not to be easily routed. She stayed until she had finished her last dull word. She is in love with you, however, so I forgive her her many sins."

"Lady Lucy?" said Marvel, opening her eyes.

"Actually Lady Lucy! You are a little witch, I think, Marvel; you have cast a spell over most of us, but you must be careful—there is a certain class of people whom it is always awkward to bring to one's feet." She spoke meaningly, watching Marvel as she spoke, but the girl remained supremely unconscious.

"Is Lady Lucy one of them?" she asked.

"Far from it. It is wisdom to captivate her. A woman with a tongue is a bad foe, and one hard to beat."

"Is it Mrs. Scarlett, then?"

"After all, I don't believe I meant anything," said Cicely, sitting down upon the hearth-rug and proceeding to build up the already brilliant fire with bits of wood and coal. She was looking very sweet and dainty in her loose gown of white lace and cachemire, and made a contrast to Marvel, who was still in her satin gown and diamonds, and who had not even taken off her long wrinkled gloves.

"Why, you are not undressed," said Mrs. Verulam suddenly. "What have you been thinking about? Now that I look at you I can see that you have been at your dreams again. I wish you wouldn't. I *know* he isn't worth it."

"I haven't been thinking so much of Fulke," said Marvel mournfully, "as of Mrs. Scarlett." Cicely started; the conjunction of names was, to say the least of it, a singular one. Had she heard anything? She looked at Marvel searchingly, to find the girl was looking at her with a very troubled expression in her eyes. "Cicely," she said, "Mrs. Scarlett *hates* me!"

Cicely laughed.

"Well, what did you expect?" she said; "you should have been prepared for that."

"But why? What have I done to her? Do you know? It is foolish, perhaps, but I can't *bear* people to dislike me, and no one has ever hated me before. At least I—I hope, I think not." She sighed deeply. "When a person

was in another person's way, did that other person hate one?" This lucid conundrum she proposed to herself, but found no answer to it. Perhaps it was too deep! "How have I injured her?" she went on out aloud, alluding again to Mrs. Scarlett.

"You have committed the unpardonable sin—you have outshone her. That for one thing, and for another——" She checked herself. "You see Mrs. Scarlett has been far too long the acknowledged beauty of our world, to look with loving eyes upon a rival. Years do not always bring sense, and you have supplanted her."

"But it is all such nonsense," said Marvel, with fine contempt. "You say that, merely as an excuse for the strange and open aversion she has shown me. But there is something more."

"Modesty is a charming quality," said Mrs. Verulam, rather alarmed by her last words, "but on me it has a nauseating effect. One should be blind, not to see how all eyes followed you to-night. You are a success, my pretty maiden. So much is assured to you. Your triumph over that green-eyed belle is as complete as it is desirable." Her own eyes shone in the firelight as she spoke, and she caught Marvel and gave her a little hug. It was delightful to her that the girl should thus innocently have trodden her foe beneath her foot. "After all," she continued presently, "there is nothing like youth; and between you and me, well as she undoubtedly wears, the charming Leonie is no chicken. Why, she might be your mother!"

Marvel was silent. She had not heard one half of Mrs. Verulam's babble, as that astute young woman knew.

"There! After all my eloquence! To think I should have discoursed so agreeably only to bare walls. You haven't heard a word of it, have you?" She began to laugh as she caught Marvel's contrite glance. "Don't try to look a lie," she said; "one should never essay to do anything out of their own province. And besides I can forgive you, as your punishment consists in your having been deaf to a really good thing."

"Say it again," entreated Marvel, "and I promise you I shall listen."

"Impossible. Bursts of genius cannot be done to order The gist of the matter lay, however, in the fact that I said Mrs. Scarlett was old enough to be your mother."

Marvel cast a faintly reproachful glance at her.

"Oh no," she said, and then with terrible wistfulness, "*My mother!* Have you forgotten, Cicely, that I am in reality nameless, that you talk so lightly? It is a strange thought, is it not, that I may not, and yet may, have a mother. If she be living I know not where she is, and if she be dead—why I know not that either."

"You always speak of a mother, why not of a possible father," said Cicely, stroking her hand. "He, too, may be living; you may meet him some day." In her soul she hoped not, for the girl's sweet sake.

"I am sure he is dead," said Marvel dreamily. "I don't know why, but I *am* sure of it. Did I ever show you his likeness?" As she spoke she drew from her bosom that old battered locket and opened and held it out to her friend.

"I didn't know you had a picture of your father," said Cicely startled. "Why this is a clue, and yet I have been always told that no one knew of——"

"No one does, for certain; yet I feel that this picture which hung round my neck on the night that Fulke—that Lady Mary—took me into her house out of that terrible storm and wind and rain," she shuddered, "was the portrait of my father!"

"Let me see it," said Mrs. Verulam eagerly. Long and earnestly she gazed at it, and then at Marvel. "It is strangely like you. and yet unlike," she said. "Do you know, when first I met you I thought you singularly resembled some one I knew, but try as I would I could not fit the resemblance?"

"My father—this portrait—perhaps you know *it?*" said Marvel, with strong emotion, bending towards her so as to study her features. But Mrs. Verulam shook her head.

"I do not know it," she said. "This face," looking at the portrait, "is entirely strange to me, although it is so marvellously like you. What a handsome man, what a chiselled nose and mouth! Yes, keep this picture safely, Marvel, it may yet be of great value to you."

"I doubt it," despondently. "Too much time has now gone by to hope for proofs of my birth."

"In effect you are a mystery—a beautiful, an interesting one," cried Mrs. Verulam brightly. "Don't be downhearted about that, it adds to you somehow. It suits you. To return once more to Mrs. Scarlett, however, I must say I wish——"

"*I* wish," interrupted Marvel, with a touch of vehemence, "that she had not betrayed such a deep animosity towards me. I would that she liked me."

"Well, do you know you fascinated her as much as you repelled her," said Mrs. Verulam thoughtfully, as she sank down again upon the white fur rug and took her knees into her embrace. "I could see that she could not take her eyes off you; they followed you persistently in whatever room you might be in, and she grew positively restless when you were out of her sight. When you left a room, almost instantly she made some excuse and left it too, I am almost sure to follow you. It was the most exaggerated case of jealousy I ever saw, or else——"

She hesitated unmistakably, and Marvel awoke to the fact that there was something hidden from her that it were well she knew.

"Go on," she said gently, though a deep pink spot had come into either cheek. "You were going to say something; say it! You know more than you would willingly tell me, yet I entreat you, dear Cicely, to be frank with me." She spoke so vehemently that Mrs. Verulam's usual *finesse* forsook her.

"Why should you imagine things?" she said confusedly.

"You will tell me?" persisted Marvel in a low tone, bending over her and turning her face to hers.

CHAPTER XXII.

"And they laugh well who laugh the last.
Is it not past?"

STILL Mrs. Verulam hesitated. Then she began to consider a little. After all, if she refused to explain the

matter to Marvel, so many others knew of it that it must infallibly come to her ears sooner or later. And those others, would they put it as gently to her as she, Cicely, who loved her?

Yet how to hurt that tender heart! She shrank from the task, and cowardwise had almost made up her mind to deny everything, when she remembered Lady Lucy's somewhat bold advice, given early in the evening. She had more than hinted her belief that Mrs. Scarlett would herself seek to wound the beautiful Lady Wriothesley, by letting her know the terms on which she and Lord Wriothesley had been when the latter had married Marvel. Lady Lucy, who knew Leonie Scarlett well, had given this as her sure opinion of what would happen unless she, Cicely, would speak a word of warning to the poor pretty child, who, the most concerned in it all, was yet the most ignorant.

Oh, to think of that woman in her low, soft, cruel voice, laying bare to Marvel so fatal a truth as Wriothesley's love for another! The thought was not to be borne. So Mrs. Verulam, with a little inward gasp of fear, girded up her loins and rushed into the breach.

"Well, if you must know—— The fact is——" she began with a stammer that was far from reassuring.

"Don't make a beginning—a preface! Leave all that out," said Marvel, whose face was very pale. "Tell me at once—whatever it is."

"You shouldn't look like that. It is really nothing. Nothing more than happens to most women. You must be sensible about it," said Mrs. Verulam, who was frightened.

"Can't you speak? It is about Mrs. Scarlett, I know. Well, if I *must* question you, what of her?"

"Only that there was once a—a flirtation between her and Wriothesley."

"Once! How long ago?"

"Eh? Oh, quite a long while now."

"I beseech you to tell me no lies," cried Marvel, rising to her feet and pushing back her chair. "I can bear it, whatever it is. I am no child, no fool. And to be trifled with is not to be endured. Tell me all. By 'once'

you mean that—that he loved that woman when he married me?"

She looked so pale, so determined, that Mrs. Verulam gave in.

"That is the truth," she said in a low tone; "though how—how he could——"

"Not a word—not just yet," breathed Marvel, raising her hand as if to enjoin silence. She moved to the window, and flinging it wide, as one might who was suffocating, she leaned out into the velvet darkness beyond.

What thoughts were hers just then! What despair! What passionate reproach! Night was near its death, and already the first faint streaks of dawn illumined the fir-clad hills. The stars were "burnt out in the pale blue air;" there was a rustling amongst the leaves as the early-waking breeze stirred them to life. Up from the garden beneath came the delicate perfume of opening roses. Each thing bespoke the dawn of another day. There was a trembling silence, a stir, a sigh, a pause, and then:

> "Morn, in the white wake of the morning star,
> Came furrowing all the orient into gold."

But what would a new-born day bring her? Naught but new-born doubts, and sickening fears, and heart-felt pains. She leaned against the window, and tightening one hand upon the other, strove to restrain the wild rebellion against her fate that was oppressing her.

"So it was her he loved?" she said at last, turning back to Mrs. Verulam, who still sat in a stricken attitude upon the rug. "I knew—I guessed there was some one, but that it should be that one woman of all others."

"There is nothing remarkable in it," exclaimed Cicely, growing voluble and scrambling to her feet. "Every man of my acquaintance (with an exception or two just to prove the rule) thinks her divine—why, I don't know; unless angels have green eyes and a most repellant manner. But that's just like men. Treat them vilely and they worship you; fall at their feet, and they will scarcely trouble themselves to pick you up. Pouf! I have no patience with

them. And Wriothesley, of all men, who really has a mind of his own!"

"Was—it going on long?"

"What? That hateful infatuation of his? No—not long. Three months at most."

"But why didn't he marry her, then?" demanded Wriothesley's wife, coming away from the window and moving impetuously into the fuller glare of the lamps where Cicely could see her more plainly. As she saw her she felt a sudden shock. The childish trust in Marvel's eyes was no longer there—the lingering touch of childhood that had up to this stayed with her, was gone. She stood there, a woman, young, lovely, but embittered by a knowledge of the world's ways that hitherto had been unknown to her.

As Mrs. Verulam gazed at her she grew sad at heart, and remorseful too. It was she who had dragged this delicate retiring flower into the fuller glare, as it were, and lo! as the hot scorching sun touched its leaves, the frail, sensitive, pretty thing had withered. She would she could have undone her deed now, but it was too late. Marvel's question still remained unanswered, and the girl drew a little nearer and touched her upon the shoulder.

"Speak!" she said imperatively. "You know all. Answer me! Why did he not marry her?"

"For the simple reason that she declined to marry him."

"She declined!" It seemed impossible; but if true it only made the case even harder to bear. With a heart crushed, wounded, rejected, yet filled with love disappointed, he had made her his wife. It was cruel, ignoble of him!

"Yes. If revenge would do you any good (which it wouldn't) you might find it in that thought. She actually rejected him. Led him on to the very last moment, till he laid his heart at her feet, and then threw him over."

"But why—why?"

"She flew at higher game. Fulke is an earl, it is true, but there are bigger titles in the market. And there was an old man—a creature too poor to name, a miserable, contemptible thing, a very wreck of what had once been human—but a duke! There lay the magic charm that

made him young and lovely. A very elixir. What were Wriothesley's love and youth when laid in the balance with that? Why, nothing. The duke proposed the very day before Wriothesley came for the answer to his proposal, and madam made a swift discovery, that marriage with Wriothesley would not tend to her happiness. So that story ended."

"And mine began. It is an iniquitous thing. I have been vilely treated." She began to walk rapidly up and down the room. She was dry-eyed, and she held her head high. There was a world of angry contempt upon her lips. She had taken it so altogether differently from what Mrs. Verulam had expected, who had anticipated tears and sobs, and gentle misery of that sort, that the latter still sat on the white rug not knowing exactly what to say or do.

"Your story is not complete," said Marvel, turning to her sharply. "Where is that old man you spoke of? She is as yet *only* Mrs. Scarlett."

"He died. If, as I said before, revenge would comfort such as you, there it is ready to your hand. But you will extract nothing from it. I know you. Yes, on the very eve of the consummation of her proudest hopes, death stepped in and shattered them. The old man was gathered to the fathers who had had ample time to forget him, and madam's chance of being a duchess was knocked on the head."

Marvel was scarcely listening. That quaint habit of hers of giving herself up to the moment and letting it carry her whithersoever it would, had taken her now back to the yacht. Once more she stood in the saloon and had caught up the paper on which he had lain prone some days before, heartbroken. Again she eagerly scanned its contents and saw the paragraph with the heading in huge letters, "Sudden death of the Duke of Dawtry." She knew all about it now quite well. No explanation could make it clearer. The old man was dead and *she* was free, but he, Fulke, was tied and bound to one whom——

She lifted both her hands and pushed back her hair from her forehead. Once again that terrible sense of suffocation was bearing down upon her. She would not endure it. She turned quickly to Cicely.

"All this has to do with her, and—Lord Wriothesley." It was the first time she had ever called her husband by his title, and Mrs. Verulam marked it with some anxiety. "But what have I to do with it? Why does she dislike me, the innocent victim?"

"My dear girl, think! She had set her heart upon being a duchess, but had Dawtry failed her she would very willingly have consented to be a countess. Dukes and earls don't grow on every bush, but she was fortunate enough to have so far netted both as to be sure of one if the other escaped her. Well, as I tell you, that old duke died, and she was fully resigned, after a decent hour or so of mourning, to fall back upon the earl. But *you* had stepped in meanwhile and the earl was not to be had. *You* had dared to interfere with her arrangements. *Voilà tout.*"

"It was an unpardonable rudeness, I feel I should apologize," said Marvel with a short laugh. "If I could undo my fault, believe me, I would."

She spoke carelessly, though her eyes were burning. Mrs. Verulam, who was fond of studying people, regarded her curiously.

"Well, you can't," she said; "and lucky it is for Wriothesley that it is so, though hardly so for you. It is a shame you should be so thrown away, but if ever he returns, Marvel, and should see you both in the same room, she, middle-aged," spitefully, "as she really is, and you at your youngest and best, why, that will be a bad quarter of an hour for *her* at all events! It was an unpleasant story from start to finish," speaking earnestly, "and I daresay you will not love me the better for being the teller of it, but yet it is better you should know it, if only as a means of guarding yourself against that woman."

"I shall be guarded. I shall know what to do." She stopped short and looked at Mrs. Verulam, still sitting on the rug: "I do not love you the less," she said.

"Come here, darling!" cried Mrs. Verulam impulsively; "here, quite close. There is one thing; it is this, I am afraid you care more than you say. But that is folly. Many men—most men—have been in love before their marriage, but it has not prevented their——"

"Now, no more," said Marvel with a strained smile. "We will forget it all for awhile at least, and whenever I am unhappy about it, as you think I am now, I shall come to you for comfort. There, is not that a concession and a promise?" She stopped speaking suddenly and looked a little blankly at Mrs. Verulam. "I do believe it is I who am lecturing you to-night," she said. "How the tables have turned!" She paused, and then, "How old I have grown!"

"My dearest girl, if you would——"

"Never mind. One must grow old sooner or later, and I have been a baby for quite a ridiculous time. Let us forget all this. Let us talk of to-night's triumphs. I was a success, eh?"

"A tremendous one. One unprecedented. But you must not let that fact turn your head," a little uneasily. "Come, tell me now whom you most liked of all your partners?"

"A question easily answered—Sir George Townshend." She seemed to have entered completely into the present question and to put all deeper considerations behind her. Her manner was a little feverish, yet hardly forced. She puzzled Mrs. Verulam more than she liked to confess.

"Sir George? I should have thought you would have found him dry—dry as the bones he is for ever digging up and examining. Did he breathe many of his scientific secrets into your ear?"

"No. On the contrary, his conversation was of the airiest matter imaginable, and the most charming." Mrs. Verulam looked at her sharply.

"Sir George?" she said again. "Any other man on earth you like; but that *he* should talk of anything airy, or charming——"

"He talked of you," said Marvel; "and so incessantly that I quite enjoyed my short time with him."

"How absurd!" Mrs. Verulam tried to frown, but failed dismally. "If he has tried to convince you that he is of the usual butterfly order, made to amuse and be amused," she said, "he is an impostor. He is heavy, I tell you, heavy as lead. Don't let him impose upon you. But he

was not the only one you talked with to-night. What," she changed colour in spite of herself as she put the question, "did you think of Mr. Savage, for example?"

"It was odd about him; he proved an old acquaintance. On that day when," bitterly, "I rid Fulke of my presence, he was in my carriage and was kind to me in many little ways on the journey. I like him, I think, though his manner—— Did it ever strike you that it was a trifle *empressé*?"

"He is always rather too pronounced to be pleasant," said Mrs. Verulam carefully. "You shouldn't mind what he says. He has always some new fad or other. Believes himself five fathoms deep in love here, or mad about a picture there, or enslaved by a new opera round the corner. But he is a nice boy enough if one agrees to take him *au naturel*, and pay no heed to his eccentricities."

It was as near as she could go to a warning, and she herself thought it very neat. There was, indeed, only one fault—Marvel did not understand one word of it.

"He is coming here to-morrow," she said, "or rather to-day," pointing to the window, through which the pale grey morning light was stealing.

"To call on you?"

"Or you; I hardly know which—both, most probably." She yawned slightly, and Mrs. Verulam rose to her feet. "We have run our time for sleeping rather fine," she said. "I must get me gone. Good-night, you pretty heart, and happy dreams to you. They *should* be happy," she caught the girl affectionately by the arms and looked at her earnestly; "but will they be? You will not let that old story torment you? It really is not worth it."

"It is not, indeed," said Marvel very evenly. "There, go to bed. One should think of nothing now but rest."

Then she kissed Mrs. Verulam and led her to the door, and stood there with a light held high above her head, smiling at that dainty matron as she sped swiftly and noiselessly up the corridor to her own room. She gained a corner, turned to wave her hand to Marvel, looking so pale and slim and ethereal in her shimmering robes with the diamonds flashing here and there and her eyes like stars, and then was gone.

Marvel went back into her room. Extinguishing the lamps, she drew aside the curtains, and watched the waking day. Slowly it came up, and slowly too, although tumultuously, her thoughts gathered and arranged themselves. *That* woman her rival! She shuddered, as Mrs. Scarlett's pale handsome face rose before her. Oh! *any* one but her! And he—it seemed to her the cruellest thing she had ever heard of. With a curious intuition she knew that he had married her out of a wild longing for revenge—a desire to prove to her he loved that he was not inconsolable. But how poor a thing it was! And she had so believed and trusted in him as the one man on earth worthy of all loving belief and trust! It was hard—*hard!*

She felt as some poor wild thing might, when trapped and caged. There was no escape for her—and no way of crying aloud her grievance. He to whom alone she could declare it had forsaken her, and was—she hardly knew where just then. A sense of desertion—of misery too acute to be borne, fell on her, and she sank upon her knees before the open window, and, leaning her head against the casement, gave herself up to despair. The cold, early dews of the morn settled on her, and clung to her soft hair; but she heeded nothing, save her own sad thoughts.

"Oh grief beyond all griefs, when fate
First leaves the young heart lone and desolate
In the wide world, without that only tie
For which it loved to live, or fear'd to die."

CHAPTER XXIII.

"Almost every one listens with eagerness to extemporary history."

"Chaucer's silence was more agreeable than his conversation."

THERE were a good many people, certainly, but very few of them to be seen. Large white umbrellas of a prodigious growth hid most of them. The sun was ninety in the shade, and all Mrs. Verulam's guests had given way beneath the

abnormal heat, and were sitting or lying about in any available spot where a breeze might be expected.

The tennis players, however, nothing daunted, still held out. One could hear the triumphant shouts of the winners and the groans of the vanquished, mingled with sharp altercations now and then, when somebody's partner had missed a ball that was, as all the world had seen, the simplest thing to take. There was a huge tent to the left of the courts, and in it a few limp people had taken refuge with the soda water and the seltzer and—the other things. The tea was in a solemn corner all by itself.

Outside, the white umbrellas looked like so many tiny tents set up on their hook as if in defiance of the real one over yonder. There were always two people under each umbrella, sometimes three—infrequently four. Mr. Kitts, who was an alarmingly social young man, kept skipping about from "Brolly" to "Brolly" (as he called the proper umbrellas) with an agility that did him credit, considering the condition of the thermometer.

"Come and have a game—do!" he said, popping his head inside one of the impromptu tents that held, at the moment, four. "It isn't half bad when you get used to it."

"A game! What d'ye take me for?" cried Sydney Dameron, a rather popular novelist, waving him aside. "Go away! Go away! We are far too clever to condescend to games. We have brains. Isn't it so, Mrs. Geraint?"

He appealed to a little stout lady at his side, who had dressed herself in white, as stout women will, with an effect that was fatal. She was fat and forty, without being fair, and had a vivacious manner that caught the unwise passer-by and nailed him to her side. She believed herself a poet born, and posed as such. Not the die-away æsthetic poet of our latter days, but a good solid, downright, *bonâ fide* rhymer of rhymes such as the healthy soul should delight in.

She had a small circle of her own—somewhere, wherever she went—who were, presumably, healthy, because they *did* delight in her—to the extent of drawing her out; which gave them no trouble whatsoever, as she loved nothing so dearly as her own voice. Of herself and her

poems—did you unluckily "bid her discourse"—she would hold forth until the sun died down; and till it rose again would you but lend your ear. Some of her "sonnets," as she loved to call them, had been written at the early age of seven, and these even in their raw state she would tell you were far above those given daily to an intelligent, yet—so far as her breathings were concerned—unenlightened public.

Next to the would-be poetess sat her husband, a handsome man of a rather music-hall type, to whom she appealed every now and then to confirm her assertions. She was gratified now by Dameron's allusion to her brains, and threw up her hands with an expressive gesture.

"Tennis! no!" she said. "I have no time for it. No inclination. You should not tempt me!" She shook her head archly at Mr. Kitts, to whom there appeared on the instant a vision of a fat feather pillow endowed with legs and arms, making a wild stroke at a ball flying miles above its head. But he kept this extraordinary optical delusion to himself. "Work—work," she declared, "is all I desire. I have no time for play. I have just—as I have been explaining to Mr. Dameron—been arranging my poems into volumes—seven I think they will make when printed—and I am only embarrassed now as to whom I shall intrust them. Eh, dear?"—to her husband, who started into more intelligent life.

"Quite so. That is all that now remains," he said decisively.

"It is most interesting, is it not?" said Dameron, addressing Sir George Townshend, who was fourth occupier of this particular umbrella. "Mrs. Geraint has everything prepared. Her charming poem to 'A dead mouse,' written at the innocent age of seven, and which I have read (so you see I may honestly speak of it), now only awaits a printing machine to carry joy to the hearts of thousands! It is the most sportive, the most extraordinary, the most genuinely mirth-provoking bit of creative genius on which my eyes have ever lit."

"Did it strike you as being comical?" said she meditatively. "At the time perhaps I thought—I meant—But it only shows how one's natural inclination towards wit

will break forth. I assure you at the time I wrote I quite believed myself pathetic."

"Well, so it is, so it is, intensely pathetic," said Dameron. "I assure you there were moments when, as I read it, I felt inclined to cry for—er—that is—with you!"

"Those little things thrown off at that tender age—there is something curious about them. Didn't that occur to you as you read them, eh?"

"Nothing occurred to me so strongly," said Dameron.

"And now there is just the one last thing, to choose a publisher," said Mrs. Geraint seriously, to whom it did not occur that the principal difficulty might lie in getting a publisher who would choose *her*. "You have had of course considerable experience, dear Mr. Dameron. Whom would you recommend to me?"

Whereupon Dameron rather unkindly mentioned the name of the leading firm in the poetry line, hardly expecting she would take him seriously. But he didn't know.

"Ah! yes. They are good people," she said thoughtfully, placing her finger to her forehead as if to help her memory. "But are they trustworthy? Might I depend upon them not to eliminate bits, or to touch up, or to alter a word or phrase? That is so important. One likes to keep one's little gems intact. No artificial fining; no false elaboration. You honestly believe they will not meddle with my poems."

"I would stake my reputation on it," declared Dameron gravely.

"Such a comfort to hear you speak so decidedly, isn't it, Sir George? And so you really and truly believe these darlings of my brain will be a success? To tell you the truth," leaning coquettishly towards him, "I have dared to believe as much myself. There is such diversity in them:

'From grave to gay, from lively to severe,'

that line always seems to me so appropriate to my genius. One might imagine that poor dear Pope had written it expressly for me."

"Perhaps he did," said Dameron. "Though," doubt-

fully, "even when you were seven he couldn't have been alive, could he?"

"Tut! of course not, you silly man," said Mrs. Geraint rather tartly. "I'm not the Wandering Jewess, I assure you. I haven't lived for centuries."

"Oh! that you might!" said Dameron devoutly. "Think what a number of your 'little things' you could knock off if time were permitted to roll by unheeded by you. By-the-by, have you ever read anything of yours to Sir George?"

"What I am anxious to know," interrupted Sir George with suspicious haste, and an angry glance at Dameron, who seemed delighted with it, "is where your talent principally lies? In tragic subjects or in lighter veins?"

"That is what you will learn if Mrs. Geraint will be good enough to read you the first volume of her intended series."

"Really," said Mrs. Geraint simpering modestly, "every emotion seems to come to me with equal readiness. I have written merry verses and melancholy verses. I have been tender, I have been cruel. I have been pointed and inconsequent—"

"Oh, *so* inconsequent!" murmured Dameron admiringly.

"And I have been—well, really, I think I might say satirical. Eh, Dickory?"—to her husband—"don't you think I might say I have been even satirical?"

"Oh! certainly satirical!" said he, as though a little shocked with her for having a doubt on the subject.

"So you see, Sir George, you could not well judge of me without a lengthened reading. But as you have expressed such a flattering desire to know, I shall be charmed to give you some of my choicest efforts as soon as we can arrange an hour. What do you say to *now*, by-the-by; this very moment? In this languorous heat what could be more enchanting than the soft liquid rhymings of——"

At this opportune instant Mrs. Verulam popped her charming head under the umbrella.

"I say, you good people, don't you want your tea?" she cried.

Sir George rose with alacrity, and so in a slower measure

did the others, and all moved in a body to the tent. Lady Wriothesley stood in the entrance to it, clad in a severely simple gown of white linen, with a heavy gold band clasping the mechlin frilling at the throat. The opening of the tent seemed to frame her in, and make the picture, if possible, more perfect.

"What a face! It is a dream," said the novelist in a low tone. He was making mental notes, as he looked at her, for his next heroine. Mrs. Scarlett, who heard him, smiled superciliously. As she entered the tent she said a gracious word or two to Marvel, and as she seated herself, drew her skirts aside and beckoned to the girl to come and sit beside her. Something curious and premeditated in the smile that accompanied this invitation predisposed Marvel to refuse it, but Mrs. Scarlett's strange, cold eyes were on hers, and, as if compelled to it against her will, she obeyed the summons.

"Is it victory that has paled your cheek?" asked Mrs. Scarlett in her slow indifferent way. She was scanning Lady Wriothesley's face as she spoke in a leisurely fashion, that was as embarrassing as it was impertinent. Marvel grew warm beneath her gaze. Almost it seemed to her as though this woman knew why her cheek was white, her lips dumb, and gloried in the knowledge. It was terrible to her to have to sit here side by side with her who held her husband's heart, who was all in all to him, whilst she, his wife, who should have had first place in his affection, was as nothing. She writhed in spirit, and then all at once a little chill fell on her, and she raised her head and looked defiantly before her. Why should she feel nervous in her presence? What hateful fascination was it that was stealing over her? She drew her breath sharply and flung it from it. She remembered how Cicely had warned her. Mrs. Scarlett was still talking in that low monotone that was like distant music:

"Of course it charmed you. Success always does, and your triumph of last night was so complete. I was only sorry that Wriothesley was not here to witness it. You know, don't you, that he is an old and dear friend of mine? He has, of course, often spoken to you of me?"

"No. Never," said Marvel, regarding her steadily.

"No? He was always a little taciturn, dear fellow. But that is carrying reserve to an extreme, eh? As I was saying, it was a pity he did not see how you were admired last night. It was your first appearance?"

"My first—yes?"

"How cruel to hide yourself from us for so long. But I do not wonder at your husband's wishing to keep you to himself. When one loves a thing, one is jealous of the very eyes that look upon it. Wriothesley was naturally, —though," playfully, "you will permit me to say selfishly— desirous of keeping you as long as he could all to himself. You see," with her swift smile, "though I have no lover myself I understand love's ways."

There was a subdued meaning in her tone and glance that maddened Marvel.

"Do you mean me to believe that you understand Lord Wriothesley's ways?" she asked icily, though her heart was beating so loudly that she half feared it must be heard.

"Well—we were friends," replied Mrs. Scarlett slowly. "Where is he now?"

"In Brazil."

"So far? Mrs. Verulam tells me you were not strong enough to accompany him. What a sad parting it must have been for two so wrapped up in each other as you were! Were you long married at the time?"

"What time?"

"When you—separated."

"Not very long. The subject seems to have a keen interest for you," said Marvel very directly.

"So it has," with an air friendly to a degree, and perfectly unmoved. "You must know I felt myself rather aggrieved when I heard of your husband's marriage."

"So I have heard," quietly.

For an instant Mrs. Scarlett's eyes flashed. Then she leant back in her seat and slowly unfurled the big crimson fan she was holding, and moved it indolently to and fro. A low insolent laugh broke from her.

"That so old a friend should have sent me no word of

so important an event naturally offended me. By the merest chance I knew of it at all. And where was the reason for such secrecy?" She paused as if seeking information from Marvel, but in reality to enjoy the expression of anguish, of passionate shame, that stole over the young and beautiful face. "Even at this moment I am ignorant of when his marriage really did take place. Was it last year, or——"

"You *know*," said Marvel in a clear voice. "Lord Wriothesley married me the week after you rejected him. Is your examination at an end? Have you said all you wished to say? Is there any other question I can answer for you?"

She was standing now, tall and firm, and was looking down at Mrs. Scarlett with eyes that flamed with vehement indignation. With that righteous anger in them they were not altogether unlike Mrs. Scarlett's own eyes.

"Well, just one!" said Mrs. Scarlett sweetly, "when do you expect him home?"

"Never!" said Marvel with a strange emphasis. What was the use of concealment with this woman who knew all, who gloried in the thought that for *her* sake the husband was false to the wife. She felt tired, desperate. Something was rising in her throat that seemed to choke her. She looked round her with a little wild appealing glance in her lovely eyes.

Mrs. Verulam came quickly up to her and laid her hand on her arm.

"Talk of India's sun," she said lightly. "It would hold down its head before ours. You will get one of your old headaches, Marvel, if you persist in braving it." Then in a hurried whisper, "Be brave, collect yourself, don't let her notice you."

She drew Marvel away with her, still talking in her pretty clear treble, until just outside the tent she came upon Sir George Townshend standing alone.

"Will you do something for me?" she said.

"Anything, in reason," gravely.

"Then take Lady Wriothesley somewhere out of this hurly-burly. The sun is a little too much for her. She is

pale and tired. Don't talk to her; meditate on your latest bone, and give her five minutes or so to recover herself."

"Dear me, Lady Wriothesley, you do look white!" said Sir George with such evident concern that Mrs. Verulam raised her eyes quickly to his. He did not seem to see her; he placed Lady Wriothesley's hand in his arm, and took her instantly away towards a secluded walk. Mrs. Verulam stood still and stared after them, until they were out of sight. Then she gave way to her feelings.

"Well!" she said, and that was all. But there was a good deal of meaning in it.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I have seen the desire of mine eyes,
The beginning of love."

MARVEL and Sir George had, however, gone only thirty yards or so when they encountered Savage coming towards them at a rapid pace. His face lit up so unmistakably on seeing Lady Wriothesley that Sir George rightly conjectured it was to see her that he was there. This gave him a chance of seeking that solitude he craved for, as he indeed was not in his best conversational mood.

"So fortunate, to meet you so soon," said Savage, directly to Marvel, lifting his hat and letting his dark face brighten into a smile. "How d'ye do, Townshend? Going anywhere in particular?"

This was an open hint that he would like to accompany them.

"No," said Townshend; "Lady Wriothesley is feeling a little overdone by the heat, and I have been given directions that she is to go to some shady spot, and when there to maintain a settled silence. The present spot seems admirably arranged for the purpose, but if we all three keep together, talk we undoubtedly shall, so as you are an older friend than I am, I think I shall leave Lady Wriothesley in your care, and take myself away."

"If she will permit it," said Savage, looking earnestly at her.

"As you will, Sir George," said she smiling faintly. She gave him a little kindly glance of comprehension, and then walked on with Savage to where the coveted garden seat might be found.

As for Sir George, he stood a moment hesitating as if uncertain whether to go back to the merry party on the lawn, which evidently seemed to him the preferable thing; or to quit the field altogether, for the day at least. This hesitation was of short duration. He settled his hat firmly on his brow, and with an air of stern determination sought the stables, found his horse and rode away homewards.

As Marvel sank wearedly upon the rustic bench, she glanced at Savage.

"It will be very dull for you," she said. "If you will leave me I shall be quite content here, and you might join the others."

"Don't send me away," entreated he quietly. "If I may only stay here, I too shall be content."

"You look as if you meant that," said Marvel. "I should be happier than I am—I have so many friends. But to sacrifice yourself like this, and on such a lovely day!"

"I don't think I look at it in that light," said he gravely. "But tell me what brought you here away from the others."

"Sir George told you I was tired."

"I think you are more unhappy than tired," said he gently.

"Is it so plainly to be seen?" She looked at him very sadly. "Well, I don't seem to mind your knowing it, somehow. But it is nothing really. I was feeling a little unstrung —a little distressed, and so I came here to get away from it all."

"That *you* should be unhappy!" he said. There was passion in his tone, but she, who up to this had stood outside love's kingdom, heard it, unheeding. "It is almost a crime," he went on in a low voice. "One is tempted to doubt the justice of it. You, so young, so sinless, should be without care, or pain, or troubling thought."

"I would not be so altogether exempt from the general

doom," said she smiling. "In that too would lie injustice. But indeed," laying her hand pathetically upon her breast, "I wish that I had less in here to think of. There is memory, the cruellest foe; who can escape it! Can I, can you?"

"I cannot," he replied, "but memory is not always merciless."

"To some perhaps it relents. But as a rule we all fear it more than we love it. And as for me, young as you deem me, I have already lived long enough to know how to be deadly tired of life. Indeed, sometimes," said she dreamily, "I wish very heartily that I were dead."

"Don't speak like that," said he, greatly shocked in spite of the calm, emotionless manner in which she had said it.

"But why not? A great many people, I think, have honestly wished that. But perhaps it is a wrong wish, and perhaps too, if brought face to face with the fu'filment of it, one would shrink." She sighed heavily, as if tired, and leaned backwards.

"You are talking too much," said he anxiously. "You are worn out from one cause or another, and you should rest, not argue about such a sorrowful point."

"It rests me to talk, I am so often silent; and do you know," said she turning to him with a charming smile, "that I like talking to you, you seem to comprehend, as it were; and you do not tell me I am fanciful, or call me a silly goose, as Cicely does."

"The gods forbid!" said Mr. Savage piously.

"I hope they always will. I should not like you to change in that respect. Though they tell me you do change in most ways."

"Do they? And who are they?"

"Never mind. It has nothing to do with it." He thought it had, but he held his peace on that score.

"True," he said, "what really matters is, that you have told me that *you* think so far well of me as to care to converse with me, that pleases me far more than I dare say."

"Perhaps it arises out of the fact that our first meeting occurred so long ago. So very long ago," said she slowly, absently, as if dwelling on some thought or scene in the re-

mote past. "But, indeed, always when I think of you, it is as a friend."

"Then you do, sometimes, think of me," said he in a low tone, bending forward to look into her eyes—such serene eyes, clear and candid as the day.

"Very often. Everything," mournfully, "connected with *that* day comes back to me with such a strange persistency."

She shivered slightly as she spoke, as at some dread remembrance, and a cloud crossed her face. "How she detests the very thought of him!" said Savage to himself, mistaking the cloud and the sorrowful manner of her.

"I am glad you regard me as a friend," he said gently. "Though, indeed, I am hardly worthy to——"

"Do not say that," interrupted she sweetly. "For indeed I need friends, and I would believe you true, though," with a sudden calm glance at him, "I have been told that you love nothing long; this thing to-day and that to-morrow, but 'constant to one thing *never!*' That argues badly for a lasting friendship. I would have *my* friends ever the same to me, through storm and shine, even as I should be to them."

He turned a penetrating glance upon her, and met her eyes full. All at once he dismissed from him his suspicions as unworthy. That face, so calm, so pure, belonged only to a soul unblemished. No hidden meaning, he was assured, lay behind the words that yet might have been those of a practised coquette. The lovely features before him forbade all speculative thought.

"I do not ask you who has given me such a bad character," he said. "I will only ask you to suspend judgment until you yourself have had time to form an opinion; and in the meantime I would entreat you to believe that you have on earth no truer friend than I am." Some colour came into his face as he spoke, and his dark, eager eyes flashed. Nothing warned Marvel at that moment, and she held out her hand to him. To her he was only that dear thing, a real friend, gained by one who was indeed poor in the possession of them. Oh that Fulke had been as kind to her as this man was! She was thinking of Wriothesley rather than of him when he next spoke.

"If I could help you," he said. "Something has annoyed you, I know, and sometimes to speak of an annoyance kills it."

"I *could* not speak of it," said she in a troubled tone, "and indeed perhaps I made too much of it. It was only that I was questioned, tormented——" She broke off. "It is rude to ask questions," she said presently, with a slight frown, "certain questions, I mean; isn't it?"

"More than that; ill-bred would be a civil word for it." Then suddenly, "Who was your tormentor?"

"Mrs. Scarlett."

"Ah! she would be."

"Why?" asked she, with a sickening fear that he, *too*, knew all. Her face grew very pale, and probably he divined her dread, because he laughed very cleverly, and with a carelessness that disarmed her.

"'Two stars keep not their motion in one sphere,'" he quoted lightly. "And I have known Mrs. Scarlett quite long enough to be sure that she would be no friend of yours. She is a very—er—*clever* woman, but that is no reason"—gaily—"why you should be afraid of her. There is no earthly reason why any one should ever regard another with dread."

"You think I am afraid?"

"I think you are nervous, and very naturally so. A woman of the world, and especially one of Mrs. Scarlett's calibre, is no mean foe."

"That is it," said Marvel, turning suddenly to him. "A foe! Oh, I wish she were not *that!* What have I done to her that she should hate me so? It was not *my* fault that I——" She checked herself, and coloured crimson. "You have known her a long time, then?" she went on confusedly. "Did—did she ever refuse *you?*"

The question was so *naïve*, the reason for it so childishly transparent that Savage, though touched by the expression in her face, could not refrain from laughing aloud.

"I did not give her the chance," he said. "I cried off at the last moment, more by luck than by good management, I allow. I will confess to you, though, that at one time she might have done what she chose with me. I was

so infatuated by her that——Well, never mind! I haunted her—I was her shadow (how awfully absurd it sounds now!). I have often gone about for days with an abominable faded flower stuck in my breast just because her hand had touched it. It went on for ever so long—she is artful about keeping you in line—putting off the *dénouement* until her *own* time arrives for getting rid of you. She put it off a little too long, however, in my case. She played with me as if I were a trout, but, as I tell you, she overdid it, and one day I made a violent effort and broke clean away, carrying the hook in me. I acknowledge that that hurt me for a considerable time, but after a while I got rid of that too, and, as you see, I am a sound fish still. Instead of throwing myself at her feet I took the tidal train to Dover and went to Paris. But I'm afraid she has never forgiven me."

"I think she has," said Marvel. "I saw how kindly she smiled at you to-day."

"Did you? Oh, then you may be sure she hasn't. And —by jove!—talk of—er—here she comes, you know!"

Indeed, quite a little party of people came round the corner. Mrs. Scarlett, Mrs. Verulam, Dameron, Kitts and one or two others. They all gave way to small expressions or glances of mild surprise when they saw Savage, whose home was some miles away, and who on the present occasion had omitted to say "How d'ye do?" to his hostess.

"I say, Savage, this is very artful of you," cried Mr. Kitts in high good humour, who spent the best portion of his life in going about and saying such things as he ought not to say. Savage looked darkly on him, but the rest laughed.

"Where is Sir George?" asked Mrs. Verulam impulsively.

"He was not in good spirits, I think," said Marvel, with a soft, intelligent smile at her. "I am sure he wanted to be alone, because the moment he and I met Mr. Savage he made a little inconsequent excuse and went away."

Mr. Dameron stooped and brushed an infinitesimal speck of dust off his boot. Really she was *too* delicious!

"Dear Sir George! He is so good, *so* obliging," said Mrs. Scarlett in her indolent way; "the best-hearted person I know."

"I entirely agree with you so far, but I really fail to understand where his good-nature came in here," said Mrs. Verulam frigidly.

"No! Do you?" cried Mr. Kitts gaily. "Why, 'three is trumpery,' don't you see, eh?"

"In the present case I do *not* see," said Mrs. Verulam, directing a glance at him that would have withered any one else, but bounded off him harmless.

"Why, look here," he was beginning, secure in the fact that Marvel's attention was engaged, when Dameron providentially struck in, and saved him.

"The situation grows serious," he said. "Let us forget everything but this mysterious disappearance of the real live baronet. An hour ago, Sir George was amongst us, hale and hearty; at this moment who shall say where he is?"

"*I* know," piped a shrill little voice from apparently nowhere; Mr. Kitts gave a dramatic start, and Dameron glanced with much emotion at Mrs. Verulam.

"He did not speak so small when in the flesh," he said in a subdued whisper. Mrs. Verulam laughed.

"Is that you, my ducky?" cried she laughing, and then a small, rather dishevelled, but lovely little creature pushed her way through a hole to the tall evergreen hedge near to which they were standing. It was Mrs. Verulam's daughter, as one need only look at her to know. She ran to her mother, as children always will who are sure of a welcome —and God help those who are not—and twined her arms round her waist.

"I saw him," she said. "And I told him he mustn't go. But he said he must. And he kissed me, and asked me if I loved him, and I said yes, but not so much as I loved my mammy. He was sorry about something, I think. What was it, mammy?"

"Because you couldn't love him enough, perhaps," said Mrs. Verulam laughing. "Oh, you bad mouse! see now what you have done to poor Sir George!" She blushed a little as she spoke, but that was the only sign of grace about her. "I should think we ought to be thinking of changing our gowns," she said presently, with a faint yawn.

"Dinner will have to be gone through, I suppose. You will stay and dine, Nigel?"

"Thank you. It *did* suggest itself to me that you might ask me, so I brought my things," replied he. "I look for a welcome from you somehow."

"Take care you don't look in vain some day," said she in a low tone, with a meaning glance at Marvel. "You must not carry that too far. I could," with a slight smile, "be unforgiving."

"You mean——"

"Yes. That is exactly what I *do* mean," interrupted she impatiently. "I am not going to have matters made unpleasant for her."

"Believe me, you credit me with more power than I possess," said he. "I could not make things pleasant or unpleasant for her. She is supremely indifferent. That is perhaps—at least, I have been supposing so—her principal charm."

CHAPTER XXV.

"It is said that jealousy is love!"

YET perhaps he hardly believed that honestly, or else the charm of indifference he had ascribed to her was so strong as to draw him to her side day after day. There was always the excuse of a house full of guests, as an attraction, but when he did come to Grangemore it was as though no one was there but Marvel. He at least appeared to see no one else, and Marvel, for her part, seemed very content to accept the trifling, and apparently harmless, attentions he showered on her.

Mrs. Verulam was secretly uneasy about it, Marvel being in a measure in her charge; her sister-in-law openly amused; and Mrs. Scarlett now and then dropped a little caustic word or two, and was plainly watching, with a rather malicious delight, the turn events were taking. As for all the others, they took it as part of the general amusement and Marvel alone was supremely unconscious.

Several times Mrs. Verulam had made up her mind to speak to her, but somehow had always shrunk from it. For one thing, the girl herself was so utterly ignorant of any thought of wrong doing, and for another there was always the possibility that she might be accused of jealousy! All the men in the house were very attentive to Marvel, as well as those out of it, who were in the habit of calling—noticeably Savage *and* Sir George Townshend! Few of her guests had forgotten that old tale of Sir George's rejection, two years ago, and as no woman likes to be forsaken, even by a rejected lover, they might easily attribute an attempt on her part to check Marvel's so-called flirtation with Savage to a determination to check her in other quarters as well. It was cowardly, she felt, but she could not as yet bring herself to warn Marvel of the sure chance she was running of getting into the merciless mouth of society.

It was rather a dull afternoon, and rain had been falling off and on all day. There was a suspicion of thunder in the air, and the heat was of that oppressive kind that affects the nerves. Savage and Sir George had ridden over early in the morning, and had stayed to luncheon, and there had been an attempt at billiard-playing afterwards. Mrs. Verulam, with her mind full of unsolved puzzles, had tired a little of all the chatter, and had stolen away from her guests to try and get an hour's quiet, and a touch of that faint breeze that the evening was bringing in its train.

She went into the smaller drawing-room, that also opened on to the balcony, and seating herself on the broad window sill, leant her head against the woodwork next her.

It was horrid weather, she told herself, and she was feeling out of sorts. They had been making *such* a row in that billiard-room. Really Lucy ought to have been a barmaid rather than a countess. And as for Mrs. Geraint! Call *her* a poetess. Marvel was the only lady amongst them. Which of them was it had said Sir George was decidedly *épris* there? Mrs. Scarlett, of course. She was mad with jealousy, that woman. Well, thank goodness, no one could accuse *her* of that petty vice.

She was growing decidedly self-righteous, when something occurred that knocked virtue and everything else out

of her head. It was the flying of some heavy body through the window, and apparently just past her nose. It skimmed, in fact, that Grecian feature. When she had sufficiently recovered from the shock it caused her to ook up again, she made the discovery that it was Sir George Townshend who had thus been shot through the window to her feet.

"I beg ten thousand pardons," cried he, evidently in a terrible fright. "But it was all that confounded curtain. I caught my foot in it. I haven't hurt you, have I?"

There was such unmistakable solicitude in his tone that her spirits rose.

"No, by a lucky chance. The eighth part of an inch nearer, and I should have been exterminated. No great harm, I daresay you think! Well, now you *have* come, sit down and talk to me for a little bit."

"So sorry, but really I haven't a moment to lose."

"Not even *one*—to me? What nonsense! Here," patting the seat beside her, "I am so old a friend that it is your duty to stay with me when I desire your company."

"Once before you desired it. It was on just such a day as this," looking out at the murky clouds that dulled the heavens. "'Stay,' you said; but afterwards I found I had stayed too long."

This remembrance of his pleased her. He did recollect then! He sometimes looked back!

"What's the good of having a parson," she said saucily, "if you won't take to heart his preachings. You *know* it is wicked to bear malice, don't you? Come, sit down here and let us gossip awhile."

"Quarrel, rather—that would be the old story. No, I can't." He drew himself up with such a Spartan determination as revealed to her all he fondly believed he had concealed. "I've dawdled away all my afternoon, and I shall miss the post if I stay longer. There is just one word I wish to say to Lady Wriothesley, and then——"

"Oh, if that is it!" said she petulantly, "why, go! I do believe you are in love with Lady Wriothesley, like all the rest of the world."

This burst of ill-temper seemed to give Sir George intense satisfaction.

"She is very charming," he said pensively.

"So I hear, morning, noon, and night, on all sides. I am quite tired of listening to that, and every other laudatory word in the vocabulary, applied to her. But don't flatter yourself that she cares for your opinion, good or ill. She is a cold little thing. She thinks of none of you."

"Other people are cold, too; and she, at least, is kind."

"Have you considered, my good friend," exclaimed she sharply, "that the coast is not clear for you? She is already appropriated, this marvellous creature! She has attached to her that awkward impediment—a husband."

"You speak only the distasteful truth," said he gloomily.

"And when he returns and finds you dangling after her, how then?"

"He may never come back," said Sir George in a sepulchral tone, though his heart was beating more merrily than it had done for many a day.

"Ah! so that is what you hope for! Is that your little game? You think he will be killed—murdered, perhaps," she cried scornfully.

"Truly, from all I have read and heard, life is not held of much account where he now is," returned Sir George mildly.

"Talk of savages," said she in high disgust; "one need not, it seems to me, go far from home to find them."

"One needn't go at all. The last representative of that illustrious race is at present in your drawing-room."

"Pouh! You know what I mean. It was a most cold-blooded speech, to wish a man murdered. I wouldn't have believed it of you. It only shows how one may be deceived even in one's most intimate acquaintances."

"One may, indeed," with a steady glance at her that made her lower her eyes for the moment.

"Your pretence at misunderstanding me," she said presently, "has recalled to my mind Nigel Savage. Have you considered that you have a formidable rival there?"

"No; for, as you say, she is cold to all alike."

"Well, I am at my wits' end about him!" she exclaimed, forgetting everything else in the real anxiety about Marvel. "He follows her about all day as if he were her lap-dog, and she never seems to think it necessary to give him a hint that it won't do. She is either very foolish or very——"

"Innocent," suggested Townshend.

"*You* support her, of course," pettishly. "Well, and you are right, too. She *is* innocent. The very incarnation of innocence. But all that will not prevent a regular imbroglio when Wriothesley comes home."

"Is he thinking of coming?"

"Who can ever tell what a man is thinking about! Just the last thing he says, you may be sure. Oh, you may rest tranquil so far. He is not coming *yet*, at all events. When he is, I am so far your friend that I shall give you timely warning of that unwished for event."

"You were never my friend," said he; "it is unlikely you will become so in the future."

"Stranger things have happened; and," with a swift glance at him, "perhaps I was your kindest friend, who knows? But to return to certainties and Nigel, I may as well tell you I am growing seriously uneasy about his misguided attentions. They are so open, so undisguised, that one feels quite a difficulty about taking notice of them; and yet I *must* do something. There is Mrs. Scarlett—she will make mischief if ever she can, and I suppose she will be able to get at Wriothesley's ear when he *does* return, unless she is gathered to her fathers, if she ever had any. And there is no such luck in store for us, I fear. She hates Marvel very honestly, and you know how simple a thing it is to whisper away a reputation, and how impossible to whistle one back; but besides——"

"In heaven's name, then, why don't you write to your cousin—to Wriothesley?" exclaimed Sir George, in much agitation. He dropped his *pince-nez*, a sure sign of mental disturbance with him, and began to pace excitedly up and down the balcony. "What the deuce!" he said indignantly. "The fellow should be *commanded* to come home. It is disgraceful that he should leave that poor

child without protection of any sort. He must be mad to do it. Write to him without delay, and point out to him his duty if he doesn't know it."

"And so spoil your chance of marrying his widow! Oh, no, I couldn't do it," said Mrs. Verulam, with mournful conviction. Then she caught his eye, and burst out laughing. "After all, you were foolish to attempt it," she said. "You are but a very inferior actor when all is told. Was ever lover yet desirous of the husband's return? Go study your part afresh; you have not caught the spirit of it."

"The spirit of what? A part to study! Why should I act a part?"

"To make me jealous," said she audaciously.

She was a little sorry when she had said it. His face changed.

"You go too far," he said, in a tone that assured her he was now seriously angry. "A coquette you are, I know; but that you should be altogether heartless! Leave me at least my respect for you."

Mrs. Verulam grew angry in her turn.

"I don't want people to respect me when they hate me," she said, with a pretty petulance.

She was indeed, as he had said, a born coquette, and through all her anger she knew that this was the sort of a speech to subdue and soften him, and allay his just wrath.

"*I* hate you—*I*?" he began vehemently; but she cut him short.

"What does it matter! It is not of *my* wrongs I wish to speak," she said, sighing heavily, as though remembering, even whilst she forgave him, the cruel manner in which he had just maligned her; "it is of Marvel. I hardly know what to do about her. In the end it is on my shoulders the blame will fall if there is any, and I greatly doubt me there will be fire to this smoke. Yet how can I forbid my house to Nigel or," with a reproachful glance at him, "to you?"

"To me you certainly can," said he abruptly. "You have only to say the word and I leave it now, and for ever. I was mad to return to it."

She hesitated, having lost her composure in a degree, and he held out his hand to her.

"Good-bye," he said.

"Oh, but not just yet. Consider; how am I to get on with my 'Sketches in Spain' without you? You would not desert me at the most critical moment, would you? And I shall never give them the final touch unless you are near me now and then to compel me to work. Besides—bless me!" cried she suddenly, as a little clock somewhere in the distance tinkled out the hour. "Who would have believed it so late? I am afraid tea has been awaiting me in the library for the last half hour. Come with me, *do!* if only to protect me from the vials of wrath that will be surely poured on my head."

She slipped her hand through his arm, and led him towards the door, once more her captive.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"And innocence hath privilege in her
To dignify arch looks and laughing eyes."

THEY were not accosted by reproaches on their entrance into the library however. No withering glances met their eye. Far from it. It did even occur to Mrs. Verulam that if she had never come in, they would scarcely have found it out. There was no pining for the longed-for tea, but rather a relishing of it. Lady Lucy was wielding one teapot and Mrs. Geraint another. Talk ran high.

Mrs. Verulam stood in the doorway and looked round her.

"So glad you waited for me," she said at last, with an irrepressible laugh.

"Oh! is that you? Come in," cried Lady Lucy graciously. "I think there is some left," cautiously shaking the lovely little teapot she held from side to side, as if listening for a sound within, "if so, you are in luck. The last cup's always the strongest."

"We waited, you know," explained Mrs. Dameron, the novelist's wife, a charmingly pretty little woman, without an ounce of brains, "until—until——"

"The tea proved too many for us," said Mr. Kitts, coming to the rescue. "Mrs. Verulam, I haven't had any yet. I couldn't, as you were not here to pour it out for me."

"Well, I'm not going to do it now," said Mrs. Verulam, settling herself cosily into a huge chair. "As the reins of government have slipped through my fingers—as I am dethroned—I shall expect to be waited upon, and taken care of for this night, at all events."

"Am I to do all the waiting and caring?" asked Kitts. "All by myself? What joy! What triumph!" He tripped over a stool as he spoke, and fell into her lap. "Dear me! Bless me! What the dooce!" ejaculated he, as he scrambled up again.

"Thanks. I don't believe I'd enjoy being cared for, or waited upon," said Mrs. Verulam rather indignantly, "if that's a specimen of your style. Get me my tea, please, and stand far away when you are handing it to me." Then suddenly: "Where is Marvel?" She addressed the question generally, and Mrs. Scarlett took upon herself to answer it. She made a little graceful motion with her shoulders, pointed her fan towards the large curtained inclosure of the bay window, and said with a soft laugh:

"As usual."

Mrs. Verulam grew on the instant furiously angry, but she managed a smile. It was impossible to mistake Mrs. Scarlett's meaning. Behind the curtains two forms could be seen; one was, of course, that of Savage.

"She is always such a quiet child," she said. "One doesn't know where to look for her."

"No?" said Mrs. Scarlett. "*I* should." She laughed again, and Mrs. Dameron joined her, not seeing the freezing glance directed at her by her husband.

"Lady Wriothesley, may I get you some more tea?" said Sir George, going over to the window, and deliberately putting back the curtains.

"Oh! have you come—and Cicely?" said Marvel, with the prettiest smile of utter friendliness. She betrayed no confusion, and made no attempt at leaving the nook she was in, but sat looking up at him with her clear lovely eyes,

her hands folded on her lap in a little peaceful fashion that became her, and had something of resignation in it. Her whole air disarmed Sir George, who had felt inclined to be angry with her, for nothing more, however, than mere folly. "Not any more tea, thank you," she said, and he dropped the curtains and went away.

"Do you know," said Savage, when he had gone, "I have never got accustomed to hear you called Lady Wriothesley. I thought of you as unmarried for so long, that I find a difficulty in changing your state now in my own mind."

"I suppose I didn't look much like—a—well, a matron, on that day," said Marvel, who always alluded to her parting with her husband as having happened on "that day." It was the most momentous occasion of her young life.

"No. I wish you had," said he thoughtfully. "But I was kept quite in the dark. It didn't occur to me for a moment that you were anything so severe as a married lady. It was a little unkind of you, wasn't it, to look so peculiarly unattached?"

"If I meant it."

"That is no excuse. You should have guarded against mistakes of the kind. Now that hat you wore. It was specially misguiding."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't know," said she, "because if you had, I think you wouldn't ever have thought about me again."

The *naïveté* of this remark entered into him. He was hard put to it not to indulge in the desire for laughter it awoke; but he did not dare to do it, with that innocent face smiling at him.

"I don't see how that would have harmed you," he said moodily.

"Oh, Mr. Savage! What an unkind thing to say. Have I so many friends that I could afford to lose one?" She leaned a little towards him with the sweetest reproach upon her face. He smiled.

"I wish you wouldn't call me that," he said tenderly.

"Call you what?"

"By my surname. You talk of being my friend, but there is something horribly unfriendly about *that*. Now

Nigel sounds so different. And, really, considering we have known each other for considerably over a year——"

She laughed gaily.

"A very barren year, however," she said. "I see you, to-day, let us say, for the first time, and I don't see you again for twelve months, and you then call me an old friend."

"Why not!" said he boldly. "And, at all events, why argue about it; I hate going into things, it commonizes them so; the fact remains that you *are* an old friend, whether our acquaintance began yesterday or in the Middle Ages. I don't trouble myself about the time I didn't know you. I don't seem to remember it. I only learned to live, when——" He broke off somewhat abruptly, alarmed by the somewhat astonished expression that was growing on her face. "Let us return to our first subject," he said. "If I tell you, you make me hate my surname, what then? Will it teach you to be merciful? *Mr.* Savage! Pah! It puts my teeth on edge. And you say it so coldly too! Why not Nigel?"

"If you wish it so very much," with a glance of open surprise, "of course I shall call you so. I would please you, if I could, in a greater matter than that. You believe me, Nigel?"

She looked at him so sweetly as she said this; so softly his name fell from her lips, that a terrible longing to take her in his arms and tell her how he loved her—to carry her away from all her dismal past, almost overpowered him. But there is a difficulty about doing such things nowadays in a crowded room, however thick may be the curtains of the window, with the delicate tinkling sound of the china and silver, and the merry laughter of the many out there beyond, within a foot or two of one's life's tragedy.

"Marvel!" cried Mrs. Verulam. Her voice came somewhat sharply.

"Yes," cried Marvel, parting the silken curtains to look into the room.

"Where is Lulu? Do you know? You have been so long in that window, that if she passed through the gardens you must have seen her."

It was a gentle hint, but there is nothing so obtuse as perfect innocence.

"I think she did run by this window awhile ago," said Marvel. "She had some bread in her hand; I think she was going to feed something. I called to her, but she would not listen."

"Wise child! Three is trumpery," said Mrs. Scarlett, lazily rubbing down the tiny terrier lying in her lap.

"Lulu is hardly old enough to be as wise as you would have her," said Mrs. Verulam, with a movement of her lips that meant mischief. Mrs. Scarlett knew that twitch well and rose to the occasion.

"You should know," she said, with a slight accession of insolence. "We must only conclude then, that Lady Wriothesley's summons was very carefully weak." She tweaked the little terrier's ears as she spoke, and it squeaked noisily.

All this was unheard by Marvel, who was still looking into the room; but the window was at a considerable distance from the fire, round which the rest were grouped, and only the murmur of the rather subdued tones reached her ears. She saw, however, Mrs. Verulam's frown, and, not being in the common secret, put it down to anxiety on the child's account.

"Are you uneasy, Cicely?" she asked in her clear voice.

"Yes, I *am* uneasy!" said Mrs. Verulam, with a meaning glance at her, that, alas! was thrown away.

"Then let some one go and look for her," cried Marvel, starting to her feet. She glanced round uncertainly, and her eyes fell on Savage. "Nigel, will you go?" she said.

An electric thrill ran through the assembly. Every one tried to look as though it were the usual thing to call a young man of a few weeks' acquaintance by his Christian name, but every one failed; Mrs. Scarlett half closed her eyes, and turned herself, with a slow, disgusted gesture, rather away from the window. Mrs. Verulam felt as if she would have given a good deal to be able to burst out crying; but she was worth more than to give way to such damning folly as that.

"With bread in her hand," she said, as if musing. "That would mean the fish. Well, we must only hope she won't fall into the carp pond, or otherwise distinguish herself!"

"Nigel, I really *think* you had better go," said Marvel again, in a distressed tone, whereon the general consternation waxed greater.

"I really think he *had!*" said Mrs. Scarlett, in a mild tone, that made most present smile, and reduced Mrs. Verulam to despair. Then began what would have been a deadly silence, but that providentially at this moment the door was flung wide, and no less a person than Miss Verulam herself was placed inside the doorway by the long-suffering woman who called herself her nurse.

She was dressed in a little white lace frock, and had a big pink sash tied round her waist. She was evidently at enmity with her clothes, but she looked for all that, a very angel. She skipped past Mr. Kitts, who would fain have caught her, and flinging herself bodily upon Sir George, clambered boldly into his arms. Even whilst she clambered she talked at Kitts over her friend's shoulder.

"No, I won't," she said, "I won't go to you. I'll go to my Georgie boy." Nothing would induce her to call the dignified Sir George by any other name but this. "And I won't kiss you, either. No, not for sweeties, nor for dolls, nor for anything. But I'll kiss my Georgie boy." She suited the action to the word; and then slipped down on his knee, and pulled out his watch. But, unfortunately, the fact that Sir George had not smiled when he returned her kiss had attracted her attention. "Why don't you laugh," she said, trying to dig up his cheeks into a risible expression with her fat little finger. "Are you sorry about something? You're always sorry now, and mammy says it is because you aren't loved enough. Is that true?"

"Fatally true!" said Sir George, with a rather constrained laugh. He knew that he had changed colour, and drew the child closer to him that he might hide his chagrin. He did not dare look at Cicely with all the curious eyes in the room upon him, but even if he had, he could not have seen her. She had pushed back her chair into a

shadowed corner, and with the help of a huge Japanese fan, was hiding her crimson cheeks from observation.

"Very well, then, *I'll* love you," said the little one fondly. She threw her arms round his neck and kissed him. "Are you better now?" asked she anxiously. It was impossible to be serious after that. Mr. Kitts led the way and every one roared. Marvel came from behind her curtains, and the child seeing her, ran to her, and claimed her for her own.

"Very well, Miss Lulu, all right," said Mr. Kitts, shaking his fist at her, as she stood nestled into Marvel's side. "You can behave as you think proper, of course, and so can I. You can bestow all your good gifts upon people utterly worthless," indicating Sir George by a wave of the hand, "upon a ghoul—a feeder on human bones—a——"

"My dear Kitts!" protested Sir George mildly.

"But I can do something, too! Christmas is approaching, and I know of a doll with the bluest eyes and the yellowest hair, and the queenliest robes, that I—*sha'n't* give you!"

"I don't care!" said Miss Verulam stoutly, but she did for all that. By degrees she edged away from Marvel, and towards Kitts, skirting ever nearer and nearer to him, and glancing at him through her sunny hair, until at last she was close enough to permit of his seizing upon her bodily, when, with a great pretence at reluctance, she let herself willingly be caught.

"Do you think it is quite right to speak to a child in that fashion?" piped Mrs. Geraint volubly. "Even at that tender age their perception is so clear. When I was little more than Lulu's age I wrote my 'Ode to Mortality,' but of course all children could not be expected to be so advanced. They used to say I was one in a thousand."

"One in ten thousand," said Dameron politely, adding in a tone that reached Mrs. Verulam only, "for that, at least, let us be duly grateful."

"Oh, to be earnest," gasped Mrs. Geraint, "that is everything! to be intense; to think always! I hope *you* are earnest."

She addressed Mrs. Dameron, whereon that ridiculous

person giggled merrily, and shook her pretty head so hard, that one readily guessed there was nothing in it.

"What for?" she asked, "to be earnest means to grow grey hairs in a hurry. They will come soon enough without beseeching them. There is Lady Wriothesley, why don't you ask her, she looks intense enough for anything. Are *you* earnest, Lady Wriothesley?"

Marvel had not been attending.

"In earnest—about what?" she asked, mistaking the question.

"Anything and everything."

"Everything—oh, let us hope not," said Mrs. Scarlett significantly. She cast a swift glance at Savage, as if to accentuate her words.

"But that is how it should be," persisted Mrs. Dameron. "I assure you, Lady Wriothesley, there is trouble in store for you, if you won't attend to Mrs. Geraint's advice. She has undertaken a mission, and she desires you as a convert. She is growing quite unhappy about you: you must try to be earnest if only to comfort her."

"Unhappy? surely there is no occasion to be unhappy about Lady Wriothesley *yet!*" said Mrs. Scarlett, with a faint yawn.

"True," said Savage nonchalantly, who had come over to take her cup from her. "It would be folly to pity a being so favoured." He spoke very low.

"By you?" she asked, as if finishing his sentence. "It is an honour, no doubt, to have *you* at one's feet!" She did not seek to hide the sneer that accompanied her words. Looking at her, he wondered how it was he had ever been at *her* feet.

"By nature, I meant," he said.

"You do not however deny that you are her slave."

"Why should I? Alas, that I am only one amongst so many!" He spoke lightly, but he had a shaft in his quiver for her still. "She only wants a season in town," he said, "to have all men at her feet!" He bowed, and turned aside, smiling—not so much at his prediction, as at the look of passionate mortification it had brought into her face.

"There sits a dethroned queen," he thought to himself, as he crossed the room to where Marvel, the new queen, stood.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"The world with calumny abounds,
The whitest virtue, slander wounds:
There are those whose joy is night and day
To talk a character away."

"Is he coming again this afternoon?" asked Mrs. Verulam with an entirely false astonishment. Considering Mr. Savage had come every afternoon for the past three weeks without comment, it was quite a remarkable thing that she should now betray surprise at his frequent visiting.

"*This* afternoon?" said Marvel (the astonishment was honest this time). "I think it would be far more remarkable if he didn't come, than if he did. He is always here, isn't he?"

Mrs. Verulam looked at her. If she *understood* she was the calmest young woman she had ever met; if not, the sooner she did the better. It was quite early, directly after breakfast, and she had Marvel all to herself for a wonder. The others were scattered all over the place, amusing themselves as best suited them.

"Yes. He is," said Cicely a little tartly. "He lives here, it seems to me."

"I thought you liked him."

"So I do. But not enough to make me blind to your interests." This was a bold stroke, and Marvel followed it up.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked. She came over and sat down on the ottoman close by Cicely, and took her hand. "You want to say something to me," she said. "Why don't you do it?"

"Because it is so *hard* to say things," said Mrs. Verulam, feeling rather inclined to cry. "And to you of all people, because—look here, darling, it's horrid of me to put it into words, I know, but don't carry it too far."

"Carry what?" asked Marvel with the sincerest bewilderment.

"Oh! I don't think you ought to meet me like that. With me, at least, you might be open. If *I* am not your friend, Marvel, who is?"

"Who indeed!" said Lady Wriothesley, with some distress. "And if I only knew what it was all about—why you were scolding me I mean—I should——"

"Tell me this," said Mrs. Verulam sharply. "Or rather," nervously, "*don't* tell me, that—that you have any foolish fancy for Nigel Savage."

"For Mr. Savage! Of course not," said Marvel. She was almost too surprised to blush. "What on earth made you think that?"

"Why on earth shouldn't I think it, you mean," said Mrs. Verulam with a touch of impatience. "One should be blind and deaf and dumb *not* to think it. So you aren't in love with him?"

"Do you forget?" said Marvel in a little hushed way, that made Mrs. Verulam rather angry.

"Well, all I can say is," she exclaimed, "that if you are as indifferent as you declare yourself, you oughtn't to flirt with him as you do." The murder was out now, and she waited somewhat anxiously for what Marvel should say or do next.

"Flirt with him!" she said. She grew very pale, and her large eyes looked out at Mrs. Verulam with a certain horror in their calm depths.

"I don't know, of course, what *you* call it," said Cicely. "I suppose you have a more poetic or æsthetic name for it; but if *I* were to let a man sit in my pocket all day, as you do, and look at me as if he longed to devour me, I know what all *my* dear friends and relatives would call it."

"*Cicely!* Do you know what you are saying?"

"And who should, if I shouldn't?" said the fair Cicely, driven to pertness through fear of those injured eyes fastened on hers. "I believe you, of course. I believe you as innocent as the babe unborn of any suspicion of coquetry, or spooning, or anything. I'll even believe you don't know

the man is madly in love with you. But I tell you what, my good child, when that Savage of yours, that fire-eater (they're all half-mad, the Savages; perhaps I should have told you that at first) discovers, one of these days, that you have been meaning nothing all this while, in spite of your rapt looks and your baby poses, he will slay you alive! When that hour comes, I honestly confess I wouldn't be you for a round crown. He won't leave so much as a bone of you to tell the tale."

"I wish you wouldn't speak to me like that," said Marvel. "It is hateful of you. It is wicked."

"Fiddle-de-dee," said Mrs. Verulam. "*I'm* not Nigel, so you need not waste powder on me. You are angelic with those tears in your eyes, I know, but——" Here she paused and changed her tone completely. "Well! you are the prettiest thing," she said, with heartfelt admiration. "I declare I don't blame any man for making a thorough fool of himself about you. It is the greatest pity, *I* know, that you are tied to that abominable cousin of mine, or you might make the biggest match of the year."

"I don't want to make any match, and I don't wish to be accused of—of encouraging any one," said Marvel, still very white. "I know you mean that Mr. Savage is—in love with me—but it is not true. It is false—*false!*" with a little irrepressible stamp of her foot. "Oh! how could you think that, Cicely? You, my *friend!* It was the cruellest thing of you."

"It was not," said Cicely quickly. "It was the most natural thing, you mean. And of course if you don't care for him no more need be said about it. But it was my duty to warn you. Bad as Fulke is proving himself to be, careless as he is, I should not like, when he left you in my care, to—to be told by him on his return that I had failed in the trust he had reposed in me. I have been very unhappy for a long time, and I only spoke now for your good. If you are going to be angry with me for speaking, it will be very unjust and ungenerous of you."

"I would not be that," said Marvel, large drops standing warm within her eyes.

"Tell me," said Mrs. Verulam, taking her hand. "In

spite of all that has happened, all that you know, do you still love your husband?"

"How can I answer you?" said Marvel tremulously. "Of love, the love of which you speak, I knew nothing until I came to you and mixed with your world. Now I know that something more is required to make life perfect than the calm, childish, unreasoning affection I had for Fulke when I married him." She stopped, and Mrs. Verulam pressed her hand.

"Tell me all," she entreated. "Have you ever thought whether this stronger affection that you speak of is also given to Wriothesley?"

"How can I be sure?" said the girl mournfully. "I don't know whether I love Fulke as I should love him, but this I *do* know, that I love no other man."

"Well, that's a satisfaction, at all events," said Mrs. Verulam briskly. "But for all that, and, indeed, specially because of that, you should be careful. When Fulke returns, you would not like him to hear little ill-natured tales of you, and—there are so many evil tongues in the world."

"You mean Mrs. Scarlett," said Marvel, who was always terribly downright. "Yes, I know I must expect only enmity from her."

"I hope you are not angry with me for speaking to you, Marvel."

"Angry, no. I am glad you told me. It is well, I suppose, to know the evil things that are being said of one."

"Don't speak like that, and don't look so down on your luck. Just be a little careful, and no one can dare say a word, not even that viper in petticoats, Leonie Scarlett. Come, cheer up, or they will all think I have been scolding you."

"Well, so you have."

"Not a bit of it. I would not dare to scold your ladyship. And I want you to look your loveliest to-day, as half the county is coming to tennis in the afternoon."

"There is one thing," said Marvel nervously. "I don't know how I shall ever look Mr. Savage in the face again. Oh, Cicely!" with growing distress, "do you think he knows, has he *heard*, what people have been saying?"

"How you run away with things! I have heard nobody say anything, and, of course, neither has Nigel. I merely wished to give you a hint as to what *might* be said, and you are making a regular mountain out of it. If you intend to change your manner to Nigel now, you will only cause double comment. For goodness' sake do be rational and sensible, and don't act like a mere baby. Now look here!" said Mrs. Verulam, who had by this time worked herself into a fine frenzy, "if you are going to cry, I shall go to my bed and leave you to entertain the county. You won't like that. I'm downright sorry I spoke at all and didn't let you give yourself over bodily a prey to the sharks of society!——Oh! no, I *don't*," with swift contrition. "Darling child, don't believe a word I have said."

"I shall try to be just the same to Mr. Savage to-day as usual. But I know I couldn't keep it up, Cicely, so I shall go away up to the place in the north, to Ringwood Abbey. And, perhaps, when you have got rid of your guests here, you will come and stay with me for a while?"

"Oh! Marvel, I have driven you away from me."

"You are the only person on earth who is really kind to me. Mr. Savage has been; but it seems I must not accept friendship at his hands. And you know yourself it is better I should go."

"Well, perhaps so," said Mrs. Verulam with a sigh.

She felt as though some impending misfortune was hanging over her, as, indeed, the loss of Marvel, who had grown wonderfully dear to her, might be called. She went about all the morning in a pining fashion, and at luncheon sent away plate after plate untasted. Sir George, who was present, noticed this in his silent way, and was harassed with doubts and fears as to what was the cause of her evident dejection.

As the afternoon deepened all the terraces and lawns grew gay with the many-coloured garments of the guests, who drove over in skittish coaches and solemn barouches, respectable landaus and modest T-carts to attend on Mrs. Verulam. There was quite a small regiment of men from the barracks in the next town, and a very large regiment of

girls of all sizes and ages from the neighbourhood around. Lord Castlerock drove over quite a bevy of his own people, and Michael Davenant, the new M.P. in the Conservative interest, who was just then being brought a good deal into notice on account of his oratorical powers, brought his wife and three daughters. Mrs. Davenant had all the remains of great beauty, but the daughters were all like their father, —blond, freckled, impossible.

"Are those the Davenants?" asked Sir George, putting up his glass.

"So I'm told," answered Dameron. "It's well to know, isn't it? I feel as if I'd had as much of an introduction to them as I shall ever want."

"Beauty don't run riot amongst 'em, it must be confessed," said Kitts mournfully. "If they were my offspring I should put their heads in bags."

"Yet their mother, when Dora Forsyth, was an acknowledged belle," said Lady Lucy. "I remember her well when I was in the schoolroom; she had the imprudence to marry a man without a feature, and," with a shrug of her ample shoulders, "what will you? Those hopelessly ugly girls are the result. But the featureless man had golden charms, and besides that, he is clever. Fossbrooke says he will carry all before him now."

"I'm glad he thought of it in time," said Mrs. Dameron disdainfully, who, though she quarrelled with him incessantly, could not endure hearing any other man accredited with clever qualities except her husband. "Is he so wonderfully clever? He has a head like a wooden horse."

"Clever! it's no name for it," said Kitts, "he is that sharp he could tell what you were writing if he only heard the scratch of your pen. He is going to play Old Harry with the new bill."

At this moment Mrs. Verulam passed by them, and Sir George went to meet her. She was looking very pensive for her, and though walking with a tall angular man, was hardly listening to what he was saying. As Sir George reached her, she was giving some message to the tall man who hurried off to deliver it.

"I have so wanted to speak to you," said Sir George in

his deliberate way. "I am anxious to know what has occurred to trouble you."

"You presuppose a good deal; in the first place, how do you know I am troubled at all?"

"I haven't studied you for four years for nothing," said he calmly. "And besides your face is a tell-tale: and another thing, you ate such a bad luncheon."

"Was it bad?" said she. "Oh! I am *so* sorry. And I was beginning to hope that this cook——"

"Pshaw!" interrupted he. "You know very well what I mean; but if I am not to be allowed to help you—why, that is of course all about it."

"*You* help me," said she with indignant reproach, "when the whole thing is all your fault! No, thank you."

"Good heavens! what have I done now?" said that injured man.

"Well, I hope you are satisfied at the result of your advice. I took it, and I am now the most miserable woman alive. I knew I should be. I knew if I listened to anything you could say, I should be wretched ever after."

"Cicely, do you know what you are saying? What on earth has happened?"

"It is all very well for you to look so virtuously innocent, but the fact remains that you have turned Marvel out of my house."

"My dear girl, I haven't said a word to Lady Wriothesley for days beyond 'how d'ye do.' You have got some absurd notions mixed up in your head."

"I shall trouble you not to call me absurd. Do you deny that you advised me to speak to Marvel about the attentions of that odious Nigel? Come now, do you deny that?—*Do* you?"

"I have a vague remembrance of having said it would be a good thing if Lady Wriothesley was more on her guard—but as to having advis——"

"Equivocation!" interposed Mrs. Verulam with fine contempt.

"Abuse me as you will," said he with a resigned shrug. "I am accustomed to it; but at the same time tell me

how all this has come to pass; I conclude you spoke to Lady Wriothesley, and she resented your interference, and——"

"Wrong, entirely wrong; Marvel has the temper of an angel, and resented nothing. But she thinks it wiser to go, and," sighing, "perhaps it is. After a little while I shall follow her."

"Where to?"

"Ringwood Abbey."

"Ah!" said Sir George. He appeared sunk in unpleasant thought for a minute or two, and then brightened. "There is capital shooting in the north," he said. Mrs. Verulam gave way to mirth.

"If you expect Marvel to give you an invitation to her house you are entirely out of it," she said. "I shan't give her a hint, I assure you."

"Who is making me out so inhospitable?" said Marvel herself at this instant. "So you know of my intended flight, Sir George," with a shy glance at him and a blush. "And you want to test my covers? Come then; I at least will promise you the heartiest of welcomes."

"There!" said Sir George with a triumphant glance at Cicely, who made him a saucy little *moue* in return. "Lady Wriothesley, a thousand thanks. I accept your kindest of invitations with all my heart."

They had joined some of the house party, and Mrs. Scarlett, who was amongst them, looked at Marvel.

"Issuing invitations. Are you leaving, then?" she asked.

"Almost directly. I am anxious for many reasons to go back to my northern home." She tried to speak lightly, but Mrs. Scarlett possessed some strange influence over her, an influence almost mesmeric, that showed itself in an access of nervousness whenever directly addressed by her.

"You go north? Why not south—to The Towers?"

"I prefer to go to Ringwood," said Marvel, feeling suddenly very sad and lonely. That old first home! So dear! so beloved. To go to it again? Oh! never, *never!* It would break her heart, she thought, to roam once more amongst its rooms and gardens, and let memory bring back,

with its too cruel fidelity, all the sweet dead past, with its hopes and beliefs, born only to be ruthlessly destroyed.

"And yet I should have thought that The Towers would have won the day in your esteem," said Mrs. Scarlett in her soft *traînante* voice. "It was there, was it not, that you were wooed and won?"

"It was there I was married," said Marvel in the stony way she had acquired to hide her pain. Her colour faded; she knew with an agony disproportionate to the occasion indeed, but yet not to be repressed, that the elder woman was looking at her, and marking, and exulting in, the sorrowful confusion that was overpowering her. She would have given worlds to escape, but knew not how. She sat there, silent, wretched, until a voice broke in her ears that was as music to her in her present distress.

"Lady Wriothesley! What! Buried alive in this stifling tent? Come forth, I pray you, and seek with me the sylvan shades and groves."

What a kind voice it was! Had he guessed of her extremity, and come to her aid? She raised her eyes, and returned the smile that Savage gave her with a little sad one of her own. She rose too and went to him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"Grief has measures
Soft as pleasures,
Fear has moods that hope lies deep in,
Songs to sing him,
Dreams to bring him,
And a red-rose bed to sleep in."

"HAS she been amusing herself again?" asked Savage, looking intently into Marvel's white face as they moved away. "Why do you submit to it?" he said with some heat. "Why not give her a Roland for her Oliver, or if you can't do that—I believe," tenderly, "you couldn't—why not keep out of her way? She's a perfect devil, that woman, when she likes."

"I am going to keep out of everybody's way," said Marvel with a slight indrawing of her breath. "I am going back to where I came from. To the north."

"To that prison! That isolation! Oh! surely not," cried he. "You are not in earnest? It is but the impulsive thought of an offended moment?" He looked eagerly at her for confirmation of his words, but she shook her head.

"I am indeed going," she said. "And soon—at once."

"You cannot go at once. Next week perhaps——"

"To-morrow," she said. "But do not speak of it to any one. I shall rise early and catch the seven o'clock train, and be far away before breakfast. I am very anxious to be gone, and except to you and Mrs. Verulam, and, perhaps—yes—Lady Lucy, I shall have no farewells to make."

"But this is such a terribly sudden determination you have come to. To leave us all without a word of warning *almost*. You," he looked at her keenly, "you must have some reason for it."

"Why should there be a reason?" said she blushing faintly. "Have *you* never longed to get away to fresh fields? And that old place up there in the north is very lovely, I can tell you, in the autumn, and besides——"

"You needn't go on," said he gloomily. "You do it very badly. Of course it was not to be expected that you would do it well—you to whom truth is as the breath you breathe. No. It is for some reason that hurts you that you are leaving us." She grew a little paler.

"If such a reason exists," she said, "I pray you do not ask to learn it."

"I have no right to ask. I know that. But if you could only trust me as your friend, I might——"

"Ah! my *friend*. That is what you must not be," said she, catching at the word. When she had spoken she knew she had made a fatal slip, but she did not know how to correct it, or explain it away, and could only stand before him confused and miserable.

"I see," said he. He was silent for awhile, and then—"So the gossiping tongues of those infer—— those women

have driven you into exile? May I ask what was the exact charge?"

"I was told—I heard—what I mean is," said she desperately, "that every one is saying you are in love with me!"

"Well?" said he. The colour had forsaken his cheek, and he looked so deadly white that she grew frightened. Was he angry? No *wonder*, too, if he was!

"It is absurd," she said hastily. "I know that as well as you do. I could have laughed at Cicely when she told me—only—only I was too upset by it. It is the most ridiculous story ever invented, but you see people insist on thinking it."

"And you?" said he. He could hardly frame the words, yet he felt as if he *should* ask the question.

"I?" she said as if hardly understanding, and then she knew, and the blood rushed in a tumult to her face, and her eyes filled with tears of shame. "Oh surely, *surely*," she said, "you cannot think that *I* ever believed so false a tale. I, who know you so well. Oh! indeed I am not surprised that you are angry about it. But not with me; you should not blame me; it is not my fault at all. I can quite understand how it vexes you. To be accused of being in love with a woman when you are not, and that woman *married*, too! Oh, it is shameful! But I have done all I could for you. I have assured Cicely that you only like me, as you like many others, and she will explain to the rest, I hope. I'm so sorry about it. I feel as if it were all my fault," she said, laying her hand gently on his arm.

A desire to laugh took hold of him; a desire nearly akin to tears. Did she know nothing? How sweet she was, how dear, how far from him. He took the pretty slender hand upon his arm, and bending his head kissed it reverently.

"Ah, yes. It was not my fault, was it?" said she, believing herself absolved from share in this dark conspiracy against his peace.

"It is the fault of evil minds," said he. "You could have nothing to do with it. But will you give in so tamely to a few spiteful women? Why not stay and brave it out and cast their scandal back in their teeth?"

"I could not," she said slowly. "It is very foolish of me, I suppose, but I have not the courage for it. The very thought of it terrifies me. And is it not cruel," she said with a little childish trembling of her lovely lips, "that I may not have you for my friend—because—because——"

"Your husband chooses to live at the other end of the world," supplied he. "They are all ready to fall upon you and rend you in pieces, but what of him? Is he doing his duty? Is he——"

"I cannot let you speak of Lord Wriothesley," said she gently. "You do not know him. You cannot therefore judge him. And, in this matter, he is not to be blamed at all."

"I will regard him as a suffering saint, if you wish it," said he impatiently; he thought it a trifle overdrawn, her defence of the man she did not love. "Or rather, with your permission, I shall let him fade from my mind. The one thing that I must remember now is that you are going away, and who could replace you?" He spoke with deep feeling.

"You are sorry that I am going," said she sweetly. "I am so glad of that. I should not have liked you to be indifferent. Ever since auntie's death, those who liked me have been very few. You and Cicely only: that is, of those outside," she corrected herself confusedly. "Of course, Lord Wriothesley——"

"Of course," said Savage courteously.

"But it is strange, is it not, how alone I remain? Do you know," gazing at him earnestly, "there was a time when I began to fear I was a person whom no one could like; and that thought was terrible. Then came you, and—" with a lovely, trustful smile at him—"I knew I was mistaken."

Oh! to tell her how he loved her! There arose within him a reckless determination to do it. To lay bare to her the passionate longings of his soul. To compel those innocent eyes to fall and hide themselves away from his. To kill for ever the childish blessed unconsciousness of evil (so near, yet so undreamt of) that tormented whilst it charmed him, as he had never in all his careless life been charmed before. But the serenity of that smile, still

lingering on her perfect face, conquered him. He did not dare destroy it.

He did not speak for a long time, watching her in his silence, and trying to fathom the calm depths of her eyes. What lay hidden beneath? Would she always be calm as this? And if not, for whom would she awake? The serenity of her sank into him and calmed him in spite of himself. What peace lay upon her brow! She was far apart from the world in which she moved. Her lips, so loving, yet so cold; her stainless brow; her eyes. . . . "And her eyes are as eyes of a dove."

"Mistaken, indeed," he said, in answer to her. But it was rather of himself he spoke. To have given his heart in this irrevocable way to an object so unattainable was, indeed, the very madness of folly. But it was too late to think of that now.

"I shall steal away," she said presently, thinking of her journey on the morrow. "I shall say good-bye to-night, to Cicely, and to Lady Lucy and you, and I shall think on my way of how they, the others, will wonder when they hear of my flight." She laughed as she said this, and though her laugh was sorrowful it angered him.

"You, at least, are not sorry to leave us," he said. "We are all nothing to you. You have a heart of ice."

"You often wrong me," she said reproachfully. "But never more than now. I am going only because I must. If I could I would gladly stay. If I were not married, for instance, I——"

"Do not talk of that," exclaimed he with some agitation. Then, as if he could no longer restrain himself, "To make that possible I would give half my life."

"Why?" said she, and then, "I know, yes. To save me from the unkind comment that now annoys me. But that will pass away. Indeed, it is all so strange that I hardly think I understand."

"No," said he, "you do not understand at all!" He stood looking moodily upon the ground. He hardly knew if he wished her to understand. If she did she would, he felt, cease to be the Marvel he adored. "When shall I see you again?" he asked presently.

"I don't know."

"Or care, it seems to me. Well, all the cackling of all the old women in Europe shall not prevent my seeing you again. Of that I warn you. If you are silly enough to give way to them I am not. You are not going to spend the rest of your life at Ringwood Abbey, I suppose?"

"I shall stay there for some time," said she hesitating.

"Until it pleases your lord and master to return, do you mean? Are you going to bury yourself alive until then? If so, I may as well bid you an eternal farewell at once, and be done with it."

"I don't know why you should speak like that. Lord Wriothesley may return at any moment. He is just the sort of person to come when least expected. Why did you say it? Do you think I am so hateful to him that the very fact of my being here keeps him from his home? Is that what you think?" She was evidently deeply offended and wounded by a suggestion that was all the more hurtful because it had so often forced itself upon her as a miserable truth.

"If I told you all I think about your husband," said Savage recklessly, "I should offend you even more than I have already done."

She sighed deeply. After all this, these were the things she had to submit to. He, Fulke, had placed her in such a position as laid her open to painful sneers and innuendoes. She looked so sad that Savage's heart smote him.

"Forgive me. It is presumption on my part to be angry for you," he said. "I shall try to still my heart, and lay a watch upon my tongue in future. So, are we never to meet again?"

"I have half promised Lady Lucy to go to her at Christmas," said she doubtfully. "But I believe, once the spell of utter loneliness grows on me again, I shall not care to break its charm."

"I shall get myself invited by Lady Lucy for next December, in spite of that," said he. "By-the-by, you wouldn't like to give me an invitation to Ringwood, in the meantime, would you?"

"Oh, no," declared she, and then she burst out laughing.

"Nothing would induce me," she said, "so it is no use your hinting." He laughed too.

"I expect, even though you *do* call me your friend, you will be very glad to see the last of me for some time," he said. "I have a vague idea that I have been making myself more than ordinarily disagreeable; you should forgive me, however. I have heard sufficient to make me unhappy enough for anything."

"Oh, yes, that horrid story! But as it isn't true, I don't think you ought to care so much."

They were now again in sight of one of the tennis courts, and came upon a party of lookers-on, who sat on garden seats, or anything else handy, and made merry over the mistakes of the players.

"Is that you, Marvel?" said Lady Lucy Verulam. "Come over here and sit down beside me. It is as good a thing as you are likely to see, Lord Castlerock's attempt at tennis."

Marvel went over and sat down beside her.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"As empty vessels make the loudest sound, so they that have the least wit are the greatest babblers."

"He's ever so much thinner than when he began," said Mr. Kitts, who in white flannels was himself a sight to behold. He pointed to where Lord Castlerock stood racket in hand, bounding now and again towards a ball, but never by any chance hitting one. That he was thoroughly enjoying himself, however, was evident, as he beamed through his glasses at his irate partner after every miss, and laughed his jolly laugh, whilst his brow bedewed the ground. His face was crimson, his mouth wide open, his hair damp.

"Isn't he a beauty?" said Mr. Kitts.

"There are few things so well calculated to throw out the delicate tints of one's complexion as tennis on a broiling

afternoon," said Dameron sententiously. He was rolling the inevitable cigarette between his fingers, and spoke with the slow air of one who has gone thoroughly into a subject, digested, and mastered it.

"Yes, how horribly red he is. Do you think it will be apoplexy?" asked Lady Lucy.

"His complexion certainly leaves a great deal to be desired," said Kitts. "But I do hope if he is going to 'bust up' he won't do it here. I hate a scene of that sort."

"Seen it often?" asked Savage, who had thrown himself on the ground midway between Marvel and Lady Lucy.

"Well, Mr. Poyntree is pale enough, at all events," said the latter, alluding to the unfortunate young man who was Lord Castlerock's partner.

"That's rage. There will be murder if Castlerock misses his ball again."

"Not at all. He was born so. He is always called Sally by the other fellows, he is so very much the lady. His pay didn't run to the amount of razors he wore out trying to raise a whisker (rumour says he would be content with even one), and now he pumice stones his cheeks every morning, but as yet no hair appeareth."

"Look at Mrs. Pelham! Isn't it absurd to see a woman with eyes like hers pretending to play tennis? For my part, I wonder how she ever appears without a veil," said Mrs. Dameron, with a little shrug of affected horror.

"Didn't you know?" said Mr. Kitts, leaning confidentially over her. "Is it possible! Why, it was her passion for tennis that—er—disarranged her orbs. *Fact*, I give you my word! She *would* go at it, you know, morning, noon, and night; and the perpetual looking from side to side for her balls gave her that rolling eye!"

"Oh! do try to learn some common sense!" said Mrs. Dameron, giving him a smart little push.

"There goes Erasmus Vine," said Mrs. Dameron, craning her neck to catch a glimpse of a stout man dressed to almost a painful pitch of fashion, who was strolling jauntily by. "Have you seen him, Lady Wriothesley?"

"Yes. What a strange looking person. Who is he?"

"Mrs. Geraint's brother. Talent runs wild in that family, you see. I asked him one day about it, and he said the germ of the matter lay in the fact that they were all 'soul.' *She* has a talent for jingling together execrable rhymes—he *used* to have a talent for making himself remarkable for his folly. He was *the* æsthete of the æsthetes; but"—with a little airy wave of her fingers, "*Nous avons changé tout cela!*"

"Even to the cut of our hair and our coat," said Mr. Kitts. "He has been reconverted of late; has got back into the old barren groove with a vengeance. No lilies now, I thank you—foolish washed-out things! No sunflowers—gaudy bits of vulgarity! Nothing now satisfies him but the rankest, the most ultra-philistinism. He goes about with no clothes worth speaking about, and——

"Dear Kitts! *consider!*" ventured Dameron mildly.

"Well. *Are* they worth speaking about? Any fellow could wear 'em, though I confess many wouldn't. They are just the little bit too good to be anything but bad. I hate a man got up like a tailor's advertisement!"

"Oh! is that it," said Dameron, with evident relief. "I quite thought you meant that he wore none at all."

"That would have been the other way round. Would have brought him back to his standing point of last year. *No* clothes would have been so faithfully pre-adamite, so deliciously pre-everything, that it certainly would have counted as an advanced stage of culture. No; he has so much clothes now that he dresses himself eight times a day, to give each suit an airing."

Lady Lucy laughed.

"He used to go in heavily for Swinburne, Burne Jones, Browning and that lot. Pictures and poems of the new era he alike worshipped. But now he eschews anything more pronounced than Millais, and states with a noble boldness that there is only one line in all that Browning wrote worthy of mention."

"*One!* That is indeed reckless!"

"It occurs in his 'Men and Women,' I think. You all know it: 'Crowded with culture.' Vine says he is so crowded that he couldn't take any more, thanks. No, Lady

Lucy, not a word! I wouldn't give way to a 'vile Americanism,' as you call it, for the world."

The day came to an end at last, as all days will. When bedtime arrived, and all the women were trooping upstairs to their respective rooms, Marvel lingered a little behind to say good-night to Lady Lucy Verulam. That loud and strong-minded person had begun by being civil to her for policy's sake, and had ended by liking her for her own.

"Good-night," said Marvel in a low earnest voice, holding out her hand.

"The same to you and many of them," said Lady Lucy. "I conclude, by the tragical tone of you, that it was not a mere *canard* of Cicely's when she told me you were going away in the morning. Yes; I know it is a secret. I am speaking as low as nature will permit; and I can quite appreciate your abhorrence of explaining matters, and bidding senseless adieux to people whom you heartily pray you never may meet again."

"At all events I did not feel like that towards you," said Marvel with a smile. "I was quite determined to give you a good-bye, whatever befel." She paused for a moment, and then said gravely "You have been very kind to me."

"Pshaw!" said Lady Lucy, "I know a lovely answer I could make to that, but soft speeches are not in my line. Of course I know why you are going; I wormed that out of Cicely, though I guessed beforehand, as there is always sure to be some idiotic man at the bottom of everything; and as for Nigel Savage, he isn't by any means good enough! I hope," sharply, "you don't think of him."

"I do, indeed, very often, said Marvel loyally. "But not as you mean. All that is absurd"—she said with some impatience—"How *could* I, when I am married!"

"Quite so," said Lady Lucy, who felt she wouldn't have laughed for anything. "Well, don't stay in the north for ever. You should divide your favours. And remember, I hold you bound to me for Christmas."

"I remember," said Marvel, who didn't know how to say she would rather be released from that engagement. Her tone was rather faint, and she consoled herself by thinking that time sometimes solves all difficulties. Lady Lucy laughed.

"You mean to try to get out of it," she said, "but you shan't. Don't attempt such a hopeless task with me. I warn you not to plead indisposition as an excuse, as I shall neither take it nor believe it. And now, good-night, child, and good-bye for a month or two."

Marvel held out her hand, but Lady Lucy drew her to her and pressed a kiss upon her forehead.

"Put your faith in Cicely," she said very kindly, "she is your friend and she will advise you well. She is a really good little thing."

So they parted with a eulogism upon Mrs. Verulam which Marvel cordially indorsed.

CHAPTER XXX.

"Adieu! I have too grieved a heart
To take a tedious leave."

* * * * *

"Heaven knows how loath I am to part from thee."

THROUGH all the sweet freshness of the early morn, the music of the many birds rang loudly. Marvel, who had risen soon after the day was fully born, stood at her open window listening to them. She felt a deep regret that she was leaving Cicely; a lesser one, but still a regret, that she was taking herself voluntarily away from the gay life into which Cicely had introduced her. It had been pleasant to her, she acknowledged, with a sigh; but it was at an end.

She leaned out to gather some late roses that had climbed so high, and in doing so became aware of a figure standing motionless in the shrubberies over there, just opposite the window. She had only time to see that it was a man, and that the face was upturned to where she stood, when the figure turned abruptly away and disappeared into a thick bit of greenery. She thought the man resembled Savage in form, but hardly believed he had been so disinterested as to quit his bed to bid her a second farewell. She hardly waited indeed to argue out the chances for and against his

so doing, but gathering her roses went down to the breakfast room.

Cicely was there awaiting her. She had got up, in spite of all Marvel's remonstrances, to pour her out the "stirrup cup," as she insisted on calling the coffee. She was evidently very much depressed, and made Marvel promise over and over again that she would write a line to her the very moment of her arrival. "And don't let Nigel ask himself to Ringwood," she said. "He is equal to anything, I know; but if he hints at such a thing be stone deaf." She put in two or three words of wisdom whilst the dull breakfast that Marvel didn't enjoy was in course of not being consumed, and at the last, when she had Marvel in her arms, began to cry.

"I shan't go to the door with you," she said, "because I can't bear servants to see me crying; they are such a supercilious lot; and even if they *did* believe I was as truly sorry as I am to lose you, their sympathy would be worse than their contempt. Now, Marvel, if you don't write I shall know you have been smashed up in some horrid railway accident, and I shall go and look for your remains, and when found shall give them a scolding, to which all my other tirades shall be as the simple cooings of the dove."

Thus between laughing and crying she bid her friend good-bye, and in spite of her horror of the servants' prying eyes followed her to the hall door, and saw her and the faithful Burton buried in the depths of the family brougham.

The horses started, the carriage went quickly up the avenue. Just at the corner, even as Mrs. Verulam stood taking a last look at it, holding up her hand to her forehead to shade her eyes from the now glowing sun, she saw a young man dart out of the side walk and precipitate himself, as it seemed to her, upon the front wheels. The horses drew up once more, and she saw that it was Savage, armed with roses. These he flung into the carriage, and, leaning through the window, addressed some eager words to one of the occupants. Even Mrs. Verulam, who tried to imagine the best always, felt it was hopeless to think those words were addressed to the discreet Burton.

The words were short, however, and indeed the whole scene was over in a moment. A pretty slender hand was extended through the window, and Savage, lifting his hat, stooped and kissed it. Then the carriage rolled on again, and Savage disappeared. Nothing remained but the memory of it, which was strong within Mrs. Verulam.

"Just as well she has gone, after all," she mused, "if *that* was going to be the sort of thing! It wouldn't have done at all; Nigel is so hopelessly imprudent. Fancy kissing her hand beneath the eyes of seventeen windows! Want of brains I call it."

* * * * * *

The loneliness of her northern home sank deep into Marvel. She missed the brightness, the laughter of the days she had left behind her, marred though they were by the studied impertinence of the woman her husband loved. Mrs. Verulam was prevented coming to her until the last week in November, so that much time was given her to grow sad, and disappointed with the monotony of her surroundings.

With Mrs. Verulam—or at least the day after her arrival—came Sir George, to the former's real or affected chagrin. She had taken honest measures to prevent his knowing the date of her visit to Marvel, yet it appeared he had been aware of it from the first. She found some faint consolation in dubbing him scornfully a private detective.

Cicely brought her child with her—who was enchanted at finding herself alone with her mammy and the two friends her childish heart had elected to honour—and, indeed, for the quartette there began a time that was fraught with only peace and a rare content. Sir George shot all the day, and in the evening was made much of by the women, whilst the mouse kept him from being utterly spoiled by keeping up a running scolding anent his destruction of "those poor lovely birdies."

Almost Marvel's first question had been as to Savage's whereabouts. She asked about him and discussed him with such a healthy openness as went farther to convince Mrs. Verulam of her indifference to him than all the protestations

in the world. However Nigel himself might have been singed in that fire through which they both had passed, Marvel at least had remained untouched and heart-whole.

"He has gone south somewhere," she said, in answer to Lady Wriothesley's questions. "To Italy he *told* me; but I firmly believe he has wandered away to Marseilles to see again that musty railway station where first his eyes fell on you."

At this Marvel laughed, treating it as a mere joke, though Mrs. Verulam was more than half in earnest. In *her* opinion he was infatuated enough for anything.

She stayed until the second week in December, and then told Marvel she had been commissioned by Lady Lucy to bring her down with her to Verulam Court.

"No refusal will be accepted," she said, "and your word is given; so get Burton to see to your things at once. Did you really believe I should let you vegetate here? Oh! And Marvel, on our way through town you must come with me to a ball that is to be given by the Marchioness of Blaine —Lucy's mother. It is to be a very special affair, and only very special people will be present. It is to be given in honour of a foreign prince who is being pretty well toadied now in the inner circles of all, and two if not three of our own royalties will also be present. Lady Blaine said she would be only too charmed to receive you, and Lucy has set her heart on your being there."

"I think, really, considering all things, I would rather not," said Marvel shyly. The separation from her husband always weighed heavily upon her.

"Nonsense. *What* things? It is an occasion not to be missed and I shall tease you into coming. Every one worth seeing will be there; and in fact they are making a tremendous fuss about it."

"Make up your mind to go to it, Lady Wriothesley," said Sir George; "if you don't she will leave you without a mind to make up. Besides, really, it will give you pleasure; and as we are all going, you will have a party of friends around you. I know you fear a crowd," he ended, with a kindly laugh.

"Very well," said Marvel, laughing too. "If I *am* to be

taken bodily possession of, a ball more or less makes little difference."

So it was decided, and on the eighth they all travelled southwards. Marvel had insisted on Cicely's being her guest in the home in Grosvenor Square, which she herself had as yet never seen; there they would stay for Lady Blaine's ball, which was to be on the seventeenth, and after that go down to Verulam Court.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"A white star made of memory long ago
Lit in the heaven of dear times dead to me."

* * * * *

"Just now I met him: at my sight he started."

THE rooms were crowded to excess, and to get up the broad marble staircases was now become quite a labour of love. The tall bronze lamps fastened to the balusters shed down a warm rose-coloured glow upon the brilliant forms that made a perpetual if slow motion up and down the stair, and the perfume of hothouse flowers made the air heavy.

It was long past midnight. The foreign prince and the home royalties had arrived some time since, and the Marchioness of Blaine, a very old woman of about eighty, with the carriage and air of a queen, had given up receiving her guests and was devoting herself with a sort of regal graciousness to his serene mightiness the stranger prince.

There was a murmur everywhere as of many hives let loose, a ripple of laughter sometimes, a burst of harmony as the band broke into a musical rapture. Every one worth knowing was present, a few who were on the road to be known, and for the matter of that, a good many, who, if they got their deserts, shouldn't be known at all.

Some of the gowns were marvels of ingenious beauty, but it was unanimously carried that Mrs. Scarlett was, as usual, the best-dressed woman there, yet one could hardly tell

what it was she wore. As she walked in that slow, graceful, sinuous fashion that distinguished her, she seemed to emit little sapphires sparks, and there was a priceless band of those stones around her neck fit for a king's ransom. All the world there remarked that the foreign prince was greatly struck with her. He was nothing very much to look at as he stood, but then he was of blood royal, which covers a multitude of ugly features. Mrs. Scarlett roused herself sufficiently to be calmly civil to him.

"How lovely she looks to-night," said Marvel, who was gazing at her in a fascinated way. "Who said she was no longer young?"

"Some horrid low person, of course," said Dameron with a little eloquent sniff.

"By Jove! *isn't* she clever?" said Mr. Kitts, who was always everywhere. He spoke in a tone of rapturous admiration. "She *has* been going it with the pigments and no mistake! Saw her a week ago at Chatterton's, and you'd have given her about a week to live, no more. What a maid is hers! Like that good lady we read of, her price must be above rubies."

"The prince seems taken with her."

"If he'd take her with him it would be a relief to some people," said Dameron, who hated Mrs. Scarlett for reasons unknown. "But no such luck I suppose. 'Put not your faith in princes!' See the adoring look on his fat face. I wonder how she manages to call it up?"

"'She wreathed her head with roses,
She wreathed her face in smiles,
Her artificial poses
That simple man beguiles.'"

Impromptu! *quite* impromptu, I assure you, Lady Wriothesley," said Mr. Kitts with a modest smile.

"We can readily believe it. It is bad enough for anything," said Dameron.

"You're jealous," said Kitts. "Oh! why isn't Mrs. Geraint, the modern Sappho, here, to applaud and understand me?"

"By-the-by, what of her?" asked Lord Rockcastle, who was dancing attendance on Marvel at this time.

"Not much. The poems still hang on her hands; it would be invidious to say heavily, but certainly they hang. I hear she has not even *yet* quite made up her mind about her publisher."

"She never will," growled Lord Rockcastle. "Never read such rot in my life! She's about the stupidest woman I know."

"Well, I don't know," said Lady Lucy. "When she first comes in, as it were, I grant you she is really nothing, too orthodox by half, but when she warms up a bit, and lets herself go, she is worth a good deal; on the subject of her own genius, for example, she is superb."

Lady Wriothesley at this moment made a sudden movement, and a rose-flush mounted to her face.

"Nigel, *you!*" she said. She held out her hand to him. She looked unfeignedly glad to see him again. So ingenuous was the warmth of her reception, that Dameron who might have had his doubts before had none now. It was the simple pleasure of a child she showed; all her feeling was laid bare, one might be sure there was nothing behind.

Savage, on the contrary, seemed constrained and, if it could be said of so thorough a man of the world, nervous. He took her hand and held it fast, whilst a dark red colour dyed his brow.

"I did not know. I had not heard," he stammered foolishly, and then all at once he recovered himself and drew his breath sharply and flung up his head as if in derision of his own weakness. "I believed you still in the north," he said.

"I could almost believe myself there, the determination to leave it has been such a recent one," she said laughing.

"You ought to give us warning, Lady Wriothesley. You should not take us by storm like this. It is ruin to our nerves," said Kitts, who as a rule always said the wrong thing. He had indeed a talent for it. Marvel smiled, not comprehending, but Savage scowled, and Dameron came to the rescue.

The whole of this little scene, the start. the welcome. had

been witnessed by a man who had come in through the doorway at the farthest end of the room. A tall man, with a distinctly military air, and a face browned by other suns than ours. He appeared to know no one and not to regret that fact, as he stood well apart from every fresh incomer, and at last edged his way into a remote corner where a magnificent majolica jar filled with pampas grasses formed an effectual hiding-place. There he stood at ease and looked around him.

It was from this coign of vantage that he caught his first glimpse of Marvel; it was only a glimpse, and an imperfect one, as she was so standing that he could only see her by flashes as the people round her moved this way or that, but the view he *did* get, held him.

The lights were shining directly on the bronze of her soft hair, and on the rich white folds of the velvet gown she wore; a gown too old for her perhaps, yet it seemed to suit the gentle dignity that belonged to her, and it sat exquisitely upon her *svelte* girlish figure. Her face, as usual, was colourless save for the red lips and the dark gleam of the lustrous eyes. Diamonds flashed whenever she moved, and high up in her hair shone the famous Wriothesley star. But the man watching her from his secret corner was too attracted by the indistinct glimpses he caught of her face to take any notice of such minor details as diamonds.

Once again she turned in his direction, and again he saw her, for a moment only. Those marvellous eyes, they seemed to sink into his soul. So true! so deep! so tender! Where before had he seen eyes like them, yet unlike? He had a vague idea that those dimly-remembered eyes had belonged to a child, whereas these were full of the sweet earnest beauty of pure womanhood.

What a lovely face! One that might well haunt the beholder. It was haunting him just now, as Marvel had laid her hand upon Lord Castlerock's arm and had vanished out of his sight. He stirred himself then, and came from behind the majolica jar with a vague notion of following that lovely vision in white velvet. As he moved a voice spoke in his ear, a hand clutched his arm.

"Why, Wriothesley! *you*, old man, after all these cen-

turies? When did you come home? And from where? Bless my stars, what a bomb you are, exploding under one's feet when least expected. I say, I must go on with old Lady Tattersall now, but I must have a talk with you by-and-by." He was swept onward by the crowd, and Wriothesley, with a sense of impatience, felt that his chances of remaining here unnoticed were smaller than ever. He had come for a purpose; had come uninvited, though sure of his welcome, as old Lady Blaine was his godmother and adored him; but the purpose was not yet fulfilled, and though disinclined to re-enter society in such a melo-dramatic fashion, he found he could not leave until he had seen her whom he had come to see.

He was idly threading his way through a music-room densely crowded, when once again his progress was arrested. This time the voice was low and soft, so mere a whisper that he could not distinguish the tone, and the one word uttered was:

"Fulke!"

He could hardly bring himself to turn. He knew it could not be Cicely Verulam or—or his wife; they were both safe away up in the north in that old castle of his, and he was conscious of a sense of thankfulness that it was so. But who was this? He slowly moved round so as to meet the speaker, and looked into the warm eyes of Leonie Scarlett.

He felt the colour recede from his lips and brow. In one moment there was an upheaval of the studied calm of eighteen months; and all things—things he had honestly sought to forget—rushed back upon him in an overwhelming flood. He stood staring at her as if fascinated. He felt chilled to his heart's core—crushed by the memory of all that past misery—the passion, the terrible awaking, the despair!

Mrs. Scarlett, watching him, noticed the emotion he could not suppress and a thrill of triumph sent a sudden flush to her beautiful face. He was hers still, then! Her own! That baby, that pale little fool, was nothing to him; *she* was all. Oh, the sweetness of it! She would reign still in a heart for which *that other* would give all her conquests

willingly; her revenge she felt was ready to her. Her power had been greater that even *she* deemed it. That long year and a half of absence had failed to vanquish it.

"Home!" she said in a low seductive voice. "In town, and never to tell me? How cruel! Had you then quite forgotten?"

"I only arrived yesterday," replied he in a dull sort of way. "There was little time—— I came here to-night—to——" He was speaking disconnectedly, and now he stopped.

"To see me?" asked she softly.

"Yes; to see you."

The old evanescent smile (how well he remembered it—and yet, was it *quite* like that?) flitted across her face.

"There is no chance of getting a quiet moment here," said she hurriedly. "But if—— Your dance, Sir Wilmot? But if—to-morrow. You know the old address? If you can come to-morrow?"

"To-morrow? Yes," replied he quickly. He was longing to be gone, to find himself alone, that he might think, and in a measure recover himself.

He made his way through the throng to an open doorway that commanded a view of the ball-room. He wanted to see her again, when she was not there to compel him to listen and answer, to see the woman to whom he had given room in his heart all this long weary time.

She had stopped dancing and was standing in the recess with her partner, who seemed decidedly *épris*, and was slowly waving her fan from side to side. Her eyes gleamed large and brilliant, her red lips were parted as if with the pleasureable fatigue of dancing, and as Wriothesley looked she laughed lightly, seemingly at some remark of her companion's. There was a feverish gaiety about her that enhanced her charms and was born of that late triumph she believed she had achieved over the man who had loved her and whom she had betrayed. She felt young again, buoyant, equal to the defiance of a world of foolish women who, in spite of all that kindly nature had dealt out to them, were so poverty-stricken that they could not hold the very men to whom they were bound!

There was a languid lustre in her eyes, a warmth in her whole air, that contrasted favourably with her usual icy coldness. One felt that there was a certain danger in the beauty of her on that night.

She was so supremely lovely! Far lovelier than when in those bygone days she had lured him to her feet. He thought again of that past wild agony—how he had knelt, and prayed and entreated—to a stone! Yes, she had grown more beautiful since, and yet—— What was it?

A curious change passed over him as he looked at her. It was indeed a moment in his life not to be lightly regarded. All on a sudden the old order changed, the past cast its skin, as it were, and in an instant the old glamour had slipped from him and he stood there emancipated—free—the poorer yet the richer for his loss! It struck him as being almost terrible, this quick sense of freedom. The love he had been hugging to his breast, cherishing it against his sternest resolves to keep it warm, was, now that he threw back the coverings that hid it, found to be stone dead within his arms!

He pondered over this thing that had come to him; and it was at last with a sense of shame that he acknowledged to himself the truth—he was of that kind that must be termed fickle! He was unstable in all things, yet in spite of his self-abasement he could not control the happiness that surged within him. He had been so long in thrall to a fruitless passion, that now to be free set his pulses throbbing in a quick delight.

He leant against a friendly wall, and a heavy sigh escaped him. A sigh of rapture. Next him were two men, also propped against this friendly wall that seemed made for the reception of waifs and strays, and presently Wriothesley became aware that they were talking. One or two words they used caught his ear.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"Last year, a brief while since, an age ago,
A whole year past, with bud and bloom and snow,
O moon that wast in heaven, what friends were we."

"MRS. SCARLETT is cut out at last," said one of them, a tall military-looking man with a fat gossipy face. Nobody like an elderly officer of the mild type for "Did you hear?" and "They say," and "Is it true that?" &c.

"Yes," said his companion sharply, a considerably younger man, "the new beauty has eclipsed her quite. Well, she couldn't hold on for ever, you know. Very much the wrong side of thirty—close on forty, I'm *told;* but one takes that *cum grano salis!* By Jove! if it's true, she ought to sell the secret. It would fetch a good deal now-a-days."

"*Did* you hear that?" said the other. "Well, forty has it; she's that, they say, and *they* always know somehow. But forty or not, she's the handsomest woman I know, by many."

"I suppose she won't take kindly to the usurper? It's rough on her after such a long and undisputed reign. I often think how cruel a moment it must be for a woman who has held the sceptre so triumphantly when she finds she must relinquish it, not so much to superior beauty—that would be bad enough—but to *youth.* There lies the sting!"

"The oddest part of this affair is that the two women are so alike. Did you hear that there was a relationship there?" with a knowing glance.

"No; nor did you either," said the other with a good-natured laugh. "Don't let us run riot in romance. As to the resemblance you speak of, it is there, I allow, but transient, hardly worthy of comment. I myself have scarcely ever noticed it."

"My dear fellow, why the colouring, or rather the very novel *want* of colouring, the eyes, the very shape of the face, *all* correspond."

"So would the features of half-a-dozen other women I know. But the expression, where is that? So totally different

that they might be two beings out of different spheres. One is like an angel—the other——" he shrugged his shoulders.

"Severe—too severe by half."

"So far from it, that I will confess to you that of the two types I prefer the latter—that is, Mrs. Scarlett's."

"She still has her worshippers, then," said the elder man laughing; "you and me. Pray the gods we prove not rivals!"

"She has more life, more grace. One, as I have said, is an angel, but angels pall on one after awhile. I prefer the *diablerie* that distinguishes Mrs. Scarlett."

"You will find yourself alone in that preference," said a third man drily, who had just joined them.

Wriothesley had listened deliberately, hoping to hear the name of the fresh beauty who had evidently (as he gathered by their conversation) taken the world of London by storm and threatened to destroy Mrs. Scarlett's prestige. He knew it was the girl in white velvet upon whom his eyes had fastened when first he entered the rooms, and he felt a certain anxiety to know her name. He did not account to himself for this anxiety, which was a vague one, and had nothing to do with the admiration with which she had inspired him. He was conscious only of the fact that he *feared* as much as he *longed* to learn her name.

He was not to hear it then, however. The trio moved away, talking now of something entirely foreign to either beauty or rivalry, and Wriothesley, with a sense of disappointment fully on him, disappeared through a door on his left and made his way to a tiny boudoir well known to him, that being rather apart from the rest of the rooms left him a faint hope that it might be untenanted.

It was a charming little apartment, hung with amber satin and half-smothered in hot-house flowers. For the moment he found his desire gratified; it was, indeed, deserted, and with a sigh of relief he flung himself upon a couch and let his brow fall forward into his palm.

He was thinking deeply—compelling himself to go back on those old scenes in which Leonie had played so strong a part and when he had believed no time could impair

the passion he then felt for her. He was still dreaming thus, when the sound of approaching voices roused him. He changed his position, withdrawing into the shadow of a window as the thick satin curtain that guarded the entrance was pushed aside to permit the entrance of two people.

"If she said *that*, I certainly should not lose heart. Cicely is difficult, I grant you, but *some* time there always comes a lucky moment! Wait for yours. Yes, leave me now. It is your dance with her, I know, and I shall be quite glad to have a quiet five minutes here all to myself. A little unsocial, isn't it? But such a crush, such a crowd, it is intolerable. Oh, Sir George, if you should see my partner—it is Lord Castlerock—do not, I *command* you," laughing, "divulge my hiding-place."

"Madam, your word is law," said Sir George bowing low.

He went away, and Marvel, with a little comfortable sigh, leant back amongst her cushions.

At the sound of her voice Wriothesley had started and now lifted his head to find himself looking at the girl who had so attracted him on his first entrance. Who was she? What was there about her to make his heart beat so convulsively? He felt as though he were on the verge of some mystery, and dreaded the discovery of it. What an exquisite face she had! She held herself like a young queen; there was indeed a lovely distinction about her to which few could lay claim.

He pushed aside the curtain of the window, and the rings that held it ran together with a slight but sharp noise. It induced her to turn her head, and—their eyes met!

Marvel rose to her feet without removing her gaze from his, and presently her face grew ghastly. It occurred to Wriothesley that, believing herself to be alone, the sudden knowledge of his presence (standing too, as he did, half enshrouded by the curtains) had unnerved her. It was an absurd idea, but nothing better suggested itself at a moment when his brain seemed on fire with conflicting emotions.

What wild fancy was this, that now had arisen and was crying aloud to him for credence?

Marvel still stood staring at him, like a frozen thing, but all at once she swayed a little, and but that he sprang to her assistance, she would have fallen. Impulsively he supported her with an arm that trembled very palpably.

"I am afraid I startled you. You are faint. Will you permit me to get you a glass of wine—some water?" He spoke hurriedly, anxiously indeed, but in the tone one would use to an utter stranger. He had not had time to belive that it could indeed be she. A feeling as of death came over Marvel. He was there, speaking to her, looking at her, and—*he did not know her!* Oh, the bitterness of it!

She tried to speak, but she could not. She was shivering as if with cold, and an awful fear that she was going to cry came over her. She felt, too, as if she could not bear his touch, and placing her hand upon his breast, pushed him nervously from her. Of course he obeyed the gesture and stepped back.

"You are better?" he said, trying to speak naturally, but not succeeding.

"Is it so long a time? Have you quite forgotten?" said she mournfully. She raised her hand to her throat as though suffocating.

"*Marvel!*" cried he with a burst of passionate astonishment, and he would have gone to her, but she waved him back. It was her last effort, however. The agitation, the surprise, the sound of his voice as it spoke her name—all were too much for her. Once again but for his arm she would have fallen; and this time she was indeed insensible.

As he stood there holding her, and gazing with mixed feelings into her face, four people came into the room. The first was Mrs. Scarlett, and she stopped short on the threshold, as though struck motionless by the scene before her. Wriothesley, pale—impassioned—with his wife in his arms! The sight was unutterably hateful to her. There had been a scene—would a reconciliation follow on it? No. She would take care to prevent *that.*

So much thought took up but a moment of time, so swift runs the brain, and she was roused into a sense of the

present by the fact of Savage's rushing quickly by her. He hurried to where Marvel lay, still unconscious in this stranger's arms, and made a movement as if to take her from him; but Wriothesley motioned him back with one hand.

"This is presumptuous, sir," said Savage, in a low tone. His face was as white as Marvel's own; his manner extremely agitated. Great Heaven! was she alive, or did that awful pallor mean death itself! "You had better surrender this lady to her friends. You have yet to account to me for the state in which I find her."

He hardly knew what he was saying, but Wriothesley remembered every word! It was the most absurd attack in the world, born evidently of a moment fraught with fear and anxiety, but it was impossible not to recognize the tone of possession—the agony of love alarmed, that lay underneath it and betrayed itself in every glance directed at the senseless form.

"Account to *you!*" said Wriothesley.

"To me—yes. Who are you, who dare to stand there, holding her against the wishes of her friends?"

"Her husband!" said Wriothesley calmly. "*And you?*"

Savage drew back as if stunned. He knew it then. Like a flash it all came back to him. That was the man who had stood at the door of the railway carriage—the man who Marvel had told him was Lord Wriothesley. He had made a fool of himself, but he hardly thought of that in the bitterness of the moment that found him face to face with *her* husband. There had always been that vague latent hope that he would never return; and now he was facing him, holding from him the one woman whom alone he desired. Thus would he hold her from him for ever!

Marvel stirred, moved a little in Wriothesley's arms, and sighed faintly. Mrs. Verulam (who, with Sir George, had also come in) was bending over her, gently but vigorously chafing her hand. She was, therefore, the first thing that Marvel saw as she opened her eyes, and a gleam of passionate relief came into her face. She caught her hand; she seemed, indeed, to cling to her, throwing off Wriothesley's support with an ill-concealed shudder.

"He did not know me!" she said to Mrs. Verulam, in a heart-broken whisper, that yet was loud enough to be heard by all. This was the last straw!—the one thing too much for the already too cruelly-burdened heart!

Mrs. Scarlett broke into a low, silvery laugh:

"It is charming! It is a little comedy," she said, turning to Savage, who was standing with moody eyes fixed on Marvel. "Now, why is not Mr. Dameron here? He who writes plays; it would be quite a little suggestion for him. 'The husband who did not know his own wife!' What a captivating title? Very French—and very effective!"

"And anything but new," said Savage icily. "It has been done about a hundred times, I should say. It has not even the element of freshness; and, for my part, I see nothing extraordinary about it. People—young as Lady Wriothesley—grow out of recognition in a few months, to say nothing of a period bordering on two years. Mrs. Verulam, who knew her before her marriage, tells me too that she has grown very much more beautiful since then—since her husband last saw her in fact."

This was a telling thrust, and Mrs. Scarlett cast at him a glance full of the deadliest hatred.

"You are a prejudiced person; you will not see the humour of it," she said sweetly. "I shall, however, keep in mind this little scene for Mr. Dameron; *he*, no doubt, will be able to make use of it."

"I wouldn't if I were you," said Savage, with meaning. "If you begin to spread stories about her, they will say you are jealous That is always a poor thing, and means—defeat. Besides, I shall take very good care that Dameron does *not* make use of your little tale, however daintily spiced it may be."

"It strikes me you go a little far," said she, patting the palm of one hand with her fan in a curiously suppressed fashion that meant mischief. "You are very careful of Lady Wriothesley; *so* careful that her husband will not have to trouble himself at all; or—must we read it the other way? Dear Nigel! you are amusing always, but never so much so as when you are in love! You will allow that I should be a judge?"

She laughed again airily, as at some exquisitely amusing memory. He had been in love with her once it was true, and he grew hot and embarrassed beneath her deliberate gaze. He thought her a fiend now, but there was a time when he had deemed her an angel. Had she found in him a butt for her laughter even then? She enjoyed her revenge for awhile, and then:

"I am not so nice as I was then, am I?" she said mockingly. "People are as we behold them. Yonder is your *beau idéal* now. See that she brings you as little harm as I did. What makes you so trenchant to-night? Has Monsieur's unexpected return put out your calculations?" She looked at him keenly, and leaned a little towards him. "They need not," she said in a soft, seductive whisper.

But if she thought to gain over Savage as a partner in the plans she was already forming, she was for once out in her calculations.

"A compact with *you? Pas si bête!*" he said with a sneer. "Look to others to join you in your unrighteous work. As for me, I thank you for the hint you have given me. An insight into your plan of warfare will enable me to put Lady Wriothesley upon her guard."

"As you will," she said with a shrug. "There have been very many fools who have thought themselves as clever as me."

"*This* fool will do his best at all events," said Savage with a bow and a slight smile.

Here Mrs. Scarlett's partner for the dance then begun, arrived upon the scene, and she went away with him. Marvel had expressed a wish to go home at once, and Mrs. Verulam was anxious to get her away as soon as possible. She was quite herself again, but looked worn and pallid to an alarming degree. She turned away from Wriothesley, however, when he would have offered her his arm to escort her to her carriage, and looked directly at Savage, who stood at a distance.

"Nigel, you will take me down?" she said distinctly, before Mrs. Verulam—who would have prevented her if she could—had divined her intention; and Nigel of course

came forward, and she laid her hand on his arm and left the room. Wriothesley would have followed, but Mrs. Verulam called to him in a voice that was very low, but, that Sir George had learned, meant much. He was, indeed, so sure of its meaning that he discreetly went towards the curtained entrance, and even slipped on to the corridor outside.

"A word, Fulke," said Mrs. Verulam; "you will come home with us to-night."

"Oh, thank you," said Wriothesley rather uncertainly, being divided between surprise at the anger in her eyes and gratitude for the hospitality she was evidently so eager to bestow. "You are very good indeed, but——"

"There is no goodness about it, and no need of thanks. The house to which I wish you to come is yours, not mine. I am staying with your wife for the few days we remain in town."

"Indeed. It makes it then the easier to refuse," said Wriothesley.

"I shall take no refusal. You must accompany me and Marvel home to-night."

"Impossible! I have my rooms engaged at Claridge's; and besides——"

"I don't care whether you have rooms engaged in every capital in Europe! I *insist* upon your putting up at your own house, where your wife is and where I am. What! do you think that poor child has not suffered enough at your hands that you would give the world *more* food for scandal? You have made her town-talk so far, by your most reprehensible neglect and persistent absence, and now you will have all your horrid clubs teeming with the fact that *she* lives in her town-house whilst you live *en garçon* in your hotel. If you are a *man*, Wriothesley, you will at least prevent that."

"You speak very harshly," said he, with a certain coldness; "but if you put matters in that light, I cannot of course any longer refuse to accede to your request. I shall be my wife's guest with pleasure."

There was little pleasure, however, in his voice.

"I am glad you have seen the reason in what I have said," replied she with equal coldness; and still with her

eyes alight with indignant anger, she joined Sir George outside the door.

"I say," said he, after a swift but true reading of her countenance, "don't go amongst the others looking like that. You're in a regular rage still, you know. They'll notice it."

"Oh, don't *bother* me," said Mrs. Verulam, with more force than elegance it must be admitted.

She went on a step or two, and then paused and burst out laughing:

"In a rage, am I? I have always given you the credit of being the most courageous man of my acquaintance, however far short you may fall in other matters. In a rage! Well, I *shouldn't* be, as I've carried my point."

"I wish I could carry mine," said Sir George, "and I should be the happiest man alive."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"Live and let live, as I will do,
Love and let love, and so will I.
But, sweet, for me no more with you:
Not while I live, not though I die.
Good-night! good-bye!"

NEXT morning Wriothesley and his wife met at breakfast. Marvel looked a little pale and tired; but this only made the soft brilliancy of her eyes more apparent. She greeted him with friendliness, though she hardly looked at him, and at first seemed disinclined for conversation. She sat behind the massive urn and poured out tea as though her whole soul were concentrated on the proper proportions of the sugar and the cream, which made it a trifle hard for Mrs. Verulam, upon whom was flung the onus of the conversation.

After a while she appealed directly to Marvel, and on the instant the girl's manner changed. She flung from her, with quite an extraordinary ease, the silence in which she had enveloped herself, and began to speak of the last

night's ball with a fluency—a brilliancy, indeed—that astonished even Mrs. Verulam. It was to her only she addressed herself.

Wriothesley sat dumb, listening and feeling as though he should awake suddenly and find it all a mere crank of his brain. Was this lovely, animated, self-possessed girl the pretty, shy child of some eighteen months ago? No wonder he had not known her!

Marvel was rattling on, with a soft laugh here, and a little air of triumph there. She made no secret of what H.R.H. had said to her, which was complimentary to a very high degree, if uttered with a clumsiness that seems to belong to royalty. In the middle of her lively recital she half rose from her chair:

"My programme," she said; "you will like to see that. It is the most interesting of unintelligible things; but the autographs on it are positively priceless. I must bring it to you."

She ran quickly to the door and up the stairs to her room, but not for the card. On the contrary, when there she seemed to have forgotten all about it, and remembered only to fall on her knees by her bed and burst into a passion of weeping. It was all too cruel! How was she to live this life day after day? Oh that it might end—that she could die! Alas for that fatal marriage! Her short sojourn in the world had taught her, amongst other things, the folly of hoping that it could be set aside. She wondered whether Cicely would expect her to go back; but breakfast was over when she left the room, and Cicely was always so good, she would understand. She had left them only barely in time; another moment and the tears that were choking her would have fallen, to her eternal disgrace.

She did not appear again until late in the afternoon, pleading fatigue as her excuse. But when she did creep down to the smaller drawing-room, hoping to find it untenanted, she found Wriothesley as well as Cicely there. They had evidently been in full discussion of a rather unamicable nature, but they ceased speaking as she entered. Wriothesley drew a lounging chair to the fire for her, and

looked at her with an increased regard that might have been born of that stormy discourse just interrupted.

"I hope you feel your fatigue less now," he said solicitously.

"Very much less, thank you."

If he had been the veriest stranger on earth her tone could not have been colder.

"A little foolish to come downstairs at all, was it not? Talking is so bad for a headache."

"I need not talk."

"No, that is true. But it is so difficult to keep silence when people are present. I shall relieve you of my presence, however, as I am going. You——"

"Are you? Where?" asked Mrs. Verulam, in defiance of all respectable rules.

"To call on Mrs. Scarlett. I promised her last night to pay her a visit to-day."

"Do you think it demands an apology?" said Mrs. Verulam, with a little peculiar laugh; and then he went away.

Marvel sat quite still. She said nothing, and neither did Mrs. Verulam, who was, indeed, compulsorily silent, as she was doing battle with her feelings. She was longing to break forth into a torrent of abuse against Wriothesley, Mrs. Scarlett, and the general ordering of things in this life; but she could not do this without giving Marvel pain, and that she shrank from. At length the latter grew restless, as though the silence was becoming unbearable, and, getting up, began to move nervously about the room, changing a flower in a vase here, and altering the position of a quaint little Wedgwood bowl on a cabinet there.

At the end she went up to Cicely, and said mournfully:

"He has gone to see her."

"So it appears," said Mrs. Verulam, affecting an air of indifference she was far from feeling.

"I shall not be able to bear it," said Marvel, whose lips had grown white.

"Don't lay too much stress on this visit. See here, Marvel, I will tell you one thing. The very fact that he openly declared his intention should show you that there is little in it."

"A very little would be too much," said Marvel coldly.

Meantime Wriothesley had stepped into a hansom and was being driven to Mrs. Scarlett's town house. All the way there memories were thronging thickly upon him, and it was with a sigh of absolute relief that he got out and went into the hall. He would get it over soon, this visit, which he felt it necessary to make, if only to explain to himself and her what terms they should be on for the future. The old love was dead. He felt unspeakably thankful for that; it now remained to see whether friendship could take its place.

He went up the thickly-carpeted staircase, noting as he went all the old landmarks. The same statue of Venus stood in the same corner; the rose-shaded lamps that used to shed such a tender glow on the passers-by, stood out from the walls; there was the hush, the quiet, the air of expectancy, the warm, scented breath of flowers. He thought it just now a little oppressive. Then the door of her boudoir was flung wide, and a second later he found himself in her presence.

It was a room charming in every respect, and therefore well suited to its mistress. Crimson lace curtains shrouded the windows, so that the cold forbidding aspect of the December day was excluded and a soft twilight reigned. A delicious fire burned upon the hearth, and a large Persian cat, snow-white, lay in a luxuriant slumber upon the rug. The walls were very delicately tinted in a flesh colour, and over a buhl cabinet a woman of Burne Jones's looked out moodily from a plain gilt frame. On the opposite wall was an exquisite thing of Birkett Foster's, an innocent idyllic bit of perfection, with a child or two in the foreground, and a gleam of scarlet, and a subdued sunlight.

There was a perfume of scented woods, rare and strange fragrances, mingled with the sweetness of hot-house flowers, and big bunches of heliotrope and daphne that lay hidden in priceless bowls behind curtains and spindle-legged tables, their presence suggested rather than seen. There was a five-fold screen of Japanese work at the far end of the room, with tall pots filled with palms standing in each fold, and a

few prayer rugs from India lay here and there upon the polished portion of the floor.

Mrs. Scarlett rose as he entered and advanced a little to welcome him. She was dressed in a gown of olive green velvet that suited her *à merveille.* It threw out the delicate pallor of her skin and cast a shade into her handsome eyes. A woman would have seen at once that she had taken elaborate care with her toilette, but Wriothesley being a man only knew that she was looking exceptionally lovely. It was a knowledge, however, that had no power to move him.

"You have come—at last!" said she, with the softest, the most flattering touch of reproach. "I have waited for you until I believed you *almost* false. But—" with a little swift, fond smile—"but not *quite!*"

"I am sorry if I have kept you waiting," said he, more gravely than the occasion required. He was feeling the situation keenly, and his manner in spite of himself was strained. "I intended to be earlier, but I could not manage it."

"Had to find an opportunity!" thought she exultantly. The little touch of intrigue delighted her. She felt quite elated, and her eyes gleamed as she turned them on him.

"An apology to a *real* friend is the unfriendliest thing I know," she said with a charming glance. "Believe me, I forgive you without explanation. *That,*" with a sudden sad lowering of her head, "is more than you could honestly say with regard to me."

"You are wrong. That is what principally brought me here to-day. To tell you that I entirely—honestly as you say—forgive you all the past."

Mrs. Scarlett moved a little into the shadow and bit her lips sharply. She hardly liked this generous condonement of her offence. She would have preferred the old anger—the unmeasured scorn. As a rule, when one forgives, it means that one has ceased to care.

"How good you are," she said very softly. "Though if you knew all there might not perhaps be so much left to pardon. But as you *don't* know, it is indeed good of you. Fulke, if I dared explain——"

"I think it will be better not," said he steadily. "No good ever yet came of explanations such as that. 'Let the dead past bury its dead.' The present may contain other things, that I have you as a friend for instance."

"I am always your friend," said she gently, though a little glitter had come into her eyes. "Whether *you* are mine is the question."

"My dear Mrs. Scarlett! Surely a very unnecessary one!"

She startled visibly as he addressed her by her surname.

"Is it to be no longer Leonie then?" she asked.

"I think," slowly, "it will be better not."

"And you. Are you to be Lord Wriothesley to me in the future?"

"I think that, too, will be wise," replied he in the same measured tone.

Mrs. Scarlett accepted her defeat with a courage that did her credit. Not a glance, not a movement, betrayed her. Perhaps she had caught at that word "wise" and saw light through it.

"Wisdom! That cold thing!" she said with a low laugh. "But if it is better—safer—so be it then. Don't stand so far over there, you will be frozen. Come nearer to the fire." She herself drew her chair a little closer to where the fragrant pine logs were blazing cheerily. But Wriothesley did not alter his position. "That ball last night was a success," she went on. "All the best people in Europe were at it, I think, to say nothing of celebrities. By-the-by, talking of celebrities, what a lovely woman Lady Wriothesley is; she took us all very much by surprise. How came it that you did not recognize her last night?"

"It was unpardonably stupid of me I must allow. But—she was so changed."

"I can quite believe that. Even since *I* first made her acquaintance she has altered to quite a remarkable degree, not only in appearance, but in—manners. In what does this change of which you speak consist?"

"When I married her," said Wriothesley in a musing tone, his eyes fixed on the glowing fire, "she was a little simple country girl."

"Ah! well, she has left all that behind her; a fact on which you may be congratulated. Little simple country maidens grow wearisome on a lengthened acquaintance. Lady Wriothesley found that out, I suppose, because she adopted the ways of the world in quite a marvellously short time. She is quick to learn. Still, for a husband not to know his wife! You will pardon me if I say it was almost too strange to be true."

"It was true, nevertheless. I suppose the fact that I believed her and Mrs. Verulam to be up in the north may partially account for my failing to recognize her. Another thing, I had never before seen her *en grande toilette.* And was not her hair done in some strange way?"

"It was done in the very height of the fashion—a new style that suits the *ingénue,*" said Mrs. Scarlett rather bitterly. "Being the fashion herself she is right to adopt all its modes of adding to one's popularity. Your wife is quite the rage now; duchesses run after her, princes vie with each other for the honour of a dance, and she can count her lovers by the score."

Wriothesley flushed a dark red. Through all the scandalous exaggeration of her words might there not be a grain of truth? He managed a laugh however.

"There is safety in a multitude," he said with an effort at carelessness that did not escape her. Few things did.

"But there is always the one flawless jewel in the string," she said, "however poor it be."

Wriothesley made a sudden movement expressive of displeasure.

"I must beg you will not discuss Lady Wriothesley," he said a little formally.

"As you will, of course," said Mrs. Scarlett, in whom the devil was now fully roused. "But if I were you I should try to get accustomed to it. You will hear her very minutely discussed on all hands. Nigel Savage's infatuation for her is in the mouth of every one."

For the space of a minute Wriothesley was silent. He was occupied with a picture that had risen before him. Once again he held his wife's inanimate body in his arms, and looked across it at a man, pale, stunned, who looked back

again at him with a murderous hatred in his eyes. Then it all faded, and he turned to Mrs. Scarlett with a touch of hauteur.

"We will leave Lady Wriothesley's name out of our conversation," he said with determination. Then, as though with a view to give the desired change to the discourse, he went on quickly, "Do you remain long in town?"

"A day or two only. Then we all go down to Verulam Court."

"Indeed! And who do you mean by 'we?'"

"The usual set, with an addition here and there, thrown in to prevent our wearying one of the other. I am going, and the Mainwarings, and Sir George and Mrs. Verulam—you know there is an old *affaire* there—and Mr. Savage and your wife, but of course you know that," with a malicious emphasis, "and the Damerons and a few others. *You* are going, too, I presume?"

"I have not been asked."

"But you will be, naturally."

"I do not think I shall go, even so."

"I should, if I were you. It amounts almost to a duty. You have been so very long separated from your wife, and Lady Wriothesley is so young and so *singularly* thoughtless."

She had returned to the charge, even against his expressed desire, with a daring unequalled. Wriothesley frowned.

"Lady Wriothesley should be grateful for the interest you take in her," he said stiffly.

"I take none. The interest I feel is all centred in you. She is *your* wife, Wriothesley; and I shall always feel the keenest interest in you and your—*honour*."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"'Tis the eternal law,
That first in beauty should be first in might."

THE word rang in his ears as he left the house. His honour! He breathed more freely as he got out of that heated

atmosphere with the enervating perfume of the many flowers, but he carried away with him, as she meant he should, a deadly fear at his heart. All through, her insinuations had tended towards one point, and that was a terrible one. Their honour had always been a precious thing in the sight of all his house, and now even to have it breathed upon seemed an accursed thing.

And it was all his own fault. He acknowledged that as he strolled idly along the pavement, his head bent downwards. He had most cruelly neglected her, that child who was his wife, and flung her as it were defenceless, innocent, ignorant into the jaws of a merciless world. What wonder if, finding herself lonely and deserted, she had turned to the first tender word offered her, and like a flower had opened and expanded beneath the warmth and sunshine of a passionate love.

Yet had he been so altogether to blame? It was she who of her own free will had abandoned *him*. He alone knew the wildness, the strength of the temptation that then had assailed him, to return with her to England and see, if only once again, the woman he then loved with such an absorbing devotion. He had conquered that desire, had wandered far afield into places unknown of men, untravelled, quick with danger, to try and kill a passion that he felt was a base wrong to the woman he had married.

Still he knew he was in fault. He did not try to shirk that; only, there were surely extenuating circumstances. The question now was, what was to be done? He could only hope the mischief was not already so deeply rooted that it could not be eradicated. That Savage was in love with his wife he could not doubt after that scene last night, but what of her? Unconsciously he began to walk faster, and a fear that was akin to despair fell on him.

He would not believe it yet. That woman might have spoken falsely. A *word* exaggerated has often created material for a lifelong quarrel, and with what viperish bitterness she had spoken of Marvel. He would speak to Cicely. She had evidently great influence over Marvel, and if she had the deuce of a temper, still her head and her heart were sound. As for this visit to Verulam, he would

prevent that at all hazards. This new Marvel was of course a little strange to him, but the old Marvel had been so willing to obey, to comply with any request of those older than her, that he felt the habit could not have entirely worn off, and she would give in to him when he showed her how he objected to her acceptance of Lady Lucy's invitation.

"Those older than her!" It suddenly returned to him that she was but eighteen, and he was—twenty-nine. A terrible disparity. She was a child still; he a man worn and tired of the buffetings of fortune. Eleven years stood between them as an inseparable barrier. He smiled grimly to himself as he remembered it was a little too late to lament over that. Then the smile faded. Good heavens! what a mess he had made of his life. He had sowed, he had reaped, and the sowing and the reaping were alike bitter. And now, to crown all, he felt that he had destroyed that poor child's life as well as his own; had dragged her down into the dull monotony that alone was left to him. If her "auntie" could but have foreseen! And to *him* she had left her child to guard, to cherish.

Well, he would save her from herself, at least, if that might be. He would positively forbid this visit to Lady Lucy, but not this evening. She was tired; her head ached. He would put off any unpleasant topic until the morning.

He had reached his own house by this, and crept very quietly up the staircase, lest she might have fallen asleep in one of the rooms, and his footstep should rouse her. He was going with special carefulness past the cosy small drawing-room that she seemed to affect, when the sound of gay laughter and the tinkling of silver against dainty china caught his ear.

He pulled up as if taken by surprise, and turning the handle of the door entered the room.

Twilight was here, too, but it was of a more orthodox sort than lit Mrs. Scarlett's apartment. It came straight from the sky. Here, too, a glorious fire shone brilliantly, and the perfume of flowers was not absent. The laughter and the tinkling arose from the lips and the spoons of quite a number of people who were scattered about the room,

and who were all apparently enjoying themselves immensely without let or hindrance.

Marvel was the centre of a little group that surrounded the tea-tray. She was dressed in an exquisite tea-gown of old gold satin half smothered in lace. Lord Castlerock was eating unlimited lumps of sugar out of her delicate little silver bowl, and Savage was leaning over her chair telling her of something absurdly comic that had occurred at last night's rout. Three or four lamps had been lit in the background, but they conduced more to the softening of the scene than to the actual giving of light.

The whole made an exquisite picture. Mrs. Verulam was the first to see him, and she rustled towards him in her wonderful new gown that combined all the blues in creation, harmoniously blended together, and addressed him with quite a gracious air. Since last she had seen him she had come to the conclusion that harsh words seldom win, and that to catch him with guile would be the easier plan.

"Come and speak to Lady Lucy, she is so anxious to see you. It appears her mother will never forgive you for not making yourself known to her last night. But if nicely managed Lucy will smooth all that."

Wriothesley suffered himself to be led up to Lady Lucy, who welcomed him exactly as if she had seen him yesterday, and then gave him a sound rating into the bargain. He only got off by promising to call on Lady Blaine next day, and proffering in person his homage and his apologies.

"A godmother is at least *somebody!*" said Lady Lucy, still a little indignant. "And to slight mamma, who has always adored you—though why——"

"My godmother is more than that," said Wriothesley, wisely breaking into what promised to be a very unsatisfactory speech. "She is the most charming of her sex. No, I shall not make a single exception."

"Well, mind you come to-morrow. We have had quite a time with her to-day, after Markham had most injudiciously told her of your being actually seen last night by reliable witnesses."

"I shall certainly not forget."

He made his escape then and went deliberately across the room to where Marvel was standing looking at the first proof of a poem that was *not* written by Mrs. Geraint.

"It is charming! What a gift!" she was saying. "I hear Cregan and Peters think so well of it. Will you tell Mr. Morland that I am indebted to him for ever for having given me this early glimpse of it? May I keep it, do you think until to-morrow? I should so like to read it when I am alone, and can more fully appreciate it."

"Oh, certainly. And—— The fact is, Lady Wriothesley, I am sent to you as an envoy from Morland to ask if you will permit him to dedicate this volume to you. Do not refuse him, I beseech you. His very heart is set on it."

"Refuse him—no!" she replied very sweetly. "Tell him from me I shall be not only pleased, but proud. Recognition from such talent as his is indeed an honour."

Her companion bowed.

"If you will permit me I shall take my leave at once," he said; "such news as I have to convey to Morland should not, I think, be delayed a moment."

She gave him her hand and he withdrew. As he did so, Wriothesley, who had heard all, took his place.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"When a man is wrong and won't admit it, he always gets angry."

"You seem to sway the world in which you move," said he with a smile that was rather forced. "Poets and princes alike offer you homage. I have almost forgotten the old Marvel."

"You have had time," said she calmly.

"True," said he, changing colour. "I hope, too, I shall have time granted me to learn the new one."

"That is in your own power. By what you say, however, I suppose you do not mean to go abroad again immediately."

"Not at all—possibly. Conscience, though tardy, had hinted to me at last that where one has large estates one has many poor, and that it is my duty to look after them. So I have come home—for good."

A little bitter smile flitted across her face.

"I am glad you remembered—your poor," she said; "perhaps they are not as forsaken as you imagine. I have made inquiries about them; I have done what I could."

"You!" he looked at her in surprise.

"Don't let that so astonish you," she said coldly. "One must do something, or else die or go mad. And you forget, or perhaps you do not know, that I was auntie's almoner for several years, young as I was; her accountant too—her helper in many ways. Alas! Those happy days!" She sighed heavily and clasped her hands before her. After a little while she lifted her head and for the first time looked full at him.

"You have sought me," she said. "You have something to say to me?"

"You have guessed rightly. I have been told that you are going to Verulam this month."

"When Mrs. Scarlett told you that, she told you the truth."

He flushed again, though his conscience was surely guiltless, but she, seeing the flush, did not believe it.

"I want you to cancel your engagement to Lady Lucy," he said, trying to speak lightly, naturally, but failing because of the steady gaze of those two large lovely eyes. "I do not want you to go to Verulam."

"No! And why?"

"For many reasons. But one of them will suffice. I am not going to Verulam and—we have been too long separated as it is. It will be better for *your* sake that we give the world no longer food for talk. Let us for the future try, at least publicly, to be on friendly terms. The slightest whisper hurts a woman's reputation."

"Ah! You have thought of that," she said with a pale smile. He saw it and it angered him.

"You compel me to think of it now," he said somewhat hastily.

"Is there a meaning in what you say? Why should not all this have been considered a year ago? Eighteen months ago?"

"I know you have every right to upbraid me on that score. But an evil, however long in practice, may be stopped. I would stop this—with your assistance," courteously. "Will you give up this visit and spend the winter with me instead?"

"And where? Have you arranged that too?

"At The Towers, I suppose."

"The Towers! Oh, no! Never—never!" she shrank from him as though he had dealt her a blow.

"Ringwood then—or Cranston. I don't think you have ever seen Cranston."

"No," she answered indifferently, and as though she would have said "I do not care if I never do." He waited for her to speak again, but she said nothing, standing there before him, tall and slender, with her eyes fixed upon the pot of forced narcissi near her, and the light from the distant lamps falling across the golden shimmer of her gown; she stood quite motionless; the laces on her bosom rose and fell quickly, but she showed no other sign of emotion.

"Well?" he said at last, with a touch of impatience. "You will give me an answer?"

"You ask me to give up this month at Verulam which I should enjoy, to go with you—you——" she paused as though to conquer some rising words— "to the dulness of isolation. Is that it?"

"It need not be isolation," coldly. "You can ask as many friends as you wish."

"Your friends?"

"No. Yours, of course."

"If I did, I should ask precisely those whom I shall meet at Verulam; therefore, why not go to Verulam?"

"I have told you. I shall not be there."

"I am sure Lady Lucy will be charmed to give you an invitation," said she carelessly. She threw up her head and sighed a little, as if weary of the subject.

"That is not the question. I do not desire to go, and I strongly object to your going. You do not understand me."

"I do, entirely. You wish, now it has pleased you to come home after nearly two years, to play the tyrant and deprive me of a pleasure to which I have been looking forward." It really did seem to her at this moment that she had been thus anticipating it with a longing heart, yet how heartily at one time she had prayed against it.

"There you wrong me," said he quickly. "I would not thwart, I would be of use to you, believe me or not as you will. That, however, is a matter that can be discussed later on. You will make up your mind to do what I think is wise in this matter?"

"I know so little of you. Your wisdom is so hid from me that I may perhaps deem it folly. And at all events, I shall not break my word with Lady Lucy."

She had grown very pale, and so had he. He looked at her.

"Am I to understand that you refuse to accede to my request?"

"You are to understand that I have given my word, and I shall keep to it."

"In spite of all I have said—that I believe it necessary that you should accompany me?"

"Your reasons?" she asked with a little frown. "You speak many words, but you give no solid reason. Why should I give in to you?" There was a sudden flash in her eyes that should have warned him that her patience was wellnigh spent.

"Because I am your husband!" he said with some heat. "You have not forgotten that fact, I suppose, and that as such I have some small right to control your actions."

"I deny it!" she cried, losing the calmness she had cultivated so long, and now breaking out into a passion of indignation. "You, who neglected, abandoned me to the comments of the world whose cruelty you yourself profess so well to know, what right have you to come now and take possession of me, my friendships, my very movements, and control and order them as though I were a very puppet? Oh! *no*, Lord Wriothesley, that would be impossible."

She made a little eloquent gesture, as though to emphasize her words. Wriothesley stood gazing at her, silenced,

amazed by this vehemence, for which he had not been prepared. The sense of neglect—of trust betrayed—that had burned itself into the girl's heart here found some small outlet, and she seized eagerly upon it. It was so little to say, so little out of all the bitterness, the misery that she had felt, and yet it eased in a measure her aching heart, that longed so piteously for some return of the love it felt. But with her love there was mingled an honest pride that cased her heart with bands of steel and forbid her to give to any man a gift so priceless, to be despised, perchance rejected.

"You have decided then," said he sternly; "you will go to Verulam?"

"Certainly," with cold distinctness.

"There is but one thing more then that I can do," replied he. He cast at her a glance full of displeasure, and crossed the room to where Lady Lucy Verulam was sitting.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"Surely where there is plenty, charity is a duty, not a courtesy. It is a tribute imposed by Heaven upon us, and he is not a good subject who refuses to pay it."

"So you are going to carry off Lady Wriothesley," he said, dropping into a chair beside her. His smile was rather a forced one, though his tone was easy.

"Yes, that stroke of fortune has fallen to me. You must not interfere with that arrangement, Fulke," she said hastily, catching sight of his face. "It is a promise of old standing, and I am bent on taking her to Verulam."

"Oh, I shall not interfere; be happy about that," said he with ill-suppressed bitterness. "But have you considered what is to be done with me?"

"I shall take you too, of course," she said laughing. "Is that it? How absurd you are, pretending to beg for invitations as if you did not know you would be welcome as the flowers in May. Mamma will be of my party and will be in the seventh heaven when she knows you are coming. My father is down there already."

"The marquis? I am glad to hear he is able to move about."

"In his bath chair only. But he quite misses the children now, so that he often comes to us, as they cannot altogether live with their grannies. He is much stronger, and fortunately his mind is as clear as ever."

They had some more desultory talk about the old people and the family generally, not worth recording. Marvel, who had seated herself somewhere near, had heard all, and was surprised at his sudden determination to go to Verulam. It did not displease her. It seemed indeed the one sensible thing to do. Why he had not decided on it sooner was what puzzled her. He had said there were reasons why she should not go to Verulam, but he had in a way declined to give them, and indeed what reason could there be? Suddenly she remembered the old foolish story about Nigel Savage. Could he have heard that? Could Mrs. Scarlett have made mischief about it? She blushed vividly as this thought occurred to her, but in a moment she had decided that it was but foolishness. From first to last it had been but an idle tale without an atom of foundation, and now she could see that people had forgotten all about it.

She looked over to where Savage was sitting listening to pretty Mrs. Dameron's lispings as though his heart was set upon them, and she smiled to herself. Yes, it was only a mischievous bit of gossip when all was said, expelled by the mind almost as quickly as it entered it.

He did, indeed, at the moment seem attracted by Mrs. Dameron, who was very well content to have him by her. She had not an ounce of brains, but she could talk prettily a certain jabber of her own that kept men, even clever ones sometimes, by her side. She was so far original that her "little ways," as they were called, were all her own, and by her admirers were voted charming. Yet if she could have seen into Savage's breast as he sat beside her, to all open seeming, hanging on her words, the weariness, the eager longing to be elsewhere that reigned there, would have been a fatal blow to her vanity.

After a while, Lady Lucy rose to say good-bye, and presently they all rustled away, leaving only Wriothesley.

"You will dine with us?" asked Mrs. Verulam, seeing Marvel remain silent.

"I think not," he said, after a moment's glance at his wife.

"Your club?"

"Yes."

"A mere excuse," thought Mrs. Verulam; "he has evidently made an appointment to dine with *her*. Oh! for the days of the Medicis."

Wriothesley was now looking at Marvel.

"I am glad your headache is so much better," said he with a touch of sarcasm. He had not forgotten how she had been laughing when he entered the room an hour ago, and how she had not so much as smiled ever since.

"It is gone," said Marvel quickly. She turned to him and smiled now, at all events. She was a little repentant for the part she had acted during their late conversation, and wished in somewise to prove to him that though they could never be the good old friends they once had been, still they might be on kindly terms for all that. "I think the fact of their all dropping in like that took it away." This was a rather unfortunate speech, but he was so astonished by that unexpected smile that he forgot to take any notice of it then.

"Whatever the cause of its removal, I am glad it is gone," he said.

"If you have nothing better to do," said she, still anxious to establish an amicable footing between them, "I think you had better change your mind and dine here."

Mrs. Verulam looked up in some trepidation. How would she take his refusal? To her astonishment, however, no refusal came.

"Thank you, yes; if you will allow me," he said simply, and stayed.

The following week they all went down to Verulam. They met Kitts at the station, bound on the same journey, and found him a valuable acquisition, as there was always a strain in their relation to each other, no matter how hard Marvel fought to be specially civil, if studiously cold, and conversation as a rule was of the languishing order. Mr. Kitts, on the

contrary, was troubled by no strain, and as he dearly loved his own voice, chattered ceaselessly by rail and road and even up the stone steps leading to the hall door of Verulam, where a servant seizing upon him, bore him away from the others and so put a stop to the animated and scientific discussion on fireworks he had only just begun with Mrs. Verulam.

Hard and cold weather followed on their arrival. A deadly, biting wintry weather, severe enough to freeze one's warmest affections. The sportsmen of the party had an excellent time of it for the first four days, but on the fifth they came downstairs to find a white world outside the windows and the snow descending with a soft vigour that threatened to imprison them should it continue.

The children, Lulu Verulam and her cousins, Lady Lucy's younger boys, were enchanted, and rushed about from room to room to see how high upon each window sill the lovely snow was mounting. They were enraptured by the hint thrown out by Mr. Kitts that soon the windows would all be blocked up and the lamps lit in the morning. They were not even cast down by further hints to the effect that the doors would also be barricaded, and that as the slender stock of provisions then in the house could not hold out long the pooi besieged would be driven to devour each other. The children, being the tenderest, would go first, said Mr. Kitts cheerfully.

"And grandpapa last," said the youngest Verulam boy, looking at the old marquis in his skull-cap, who certainly did suggest the idea of being a tough morsel. Lady Lucy, who had a Christmas tree on hand for the poor of the parish, was not sorry for a day that kept all indoors, and towards the afternoon marshalled the entire force of guests into the library—an immense room—where two enormous fires roared, and sat them down to the dressing of dolls and such-like innocent amusements. There was to be no time lost over the putting on of teagowns, she told them sternly; they were to work steadily on until the first dressing bell rang; and if they got time even to get through one cup of tea each, they were to be duly grateful.

It was a terribly dark afternoon, and all the lamps had to

be lit at an abnormally early hour. A large conservatory, heated by pipes, opened off the library, and this too was lit by coloured lamps that shone brilliantly in the distance. The blinds had not been pulled down, the day was still so ridiculously young, and the effect of the silent, swiftly falling snow gave one a little pleasurable delight in the cosy warmth of the life within doors.

All sorts of glistening scraps of satins, silks, and laces lay strewn about. Here was the glitter of tinsel; there the gleam of many-coloured beads. The sparkling of the jewels on the white fingers as they drew the deft needle through the gaudy stuffs, the tints of the exquisite dresses as the lamps shone on them, and beyond and above all the pretty faces, bright with an honest zeal to turn out such handiwork as should delight the innocent soul of the little rustic, all made a charming picture.

Mrs. Dameron indeed had developed a perfect talent for the dressing of dolls. Beneath her touch they grew from mere bags of sawdust into perfect visions of beauty. She was to be congratulated, said her husband, as he bent over the last fairy princess she had produced;—it was the first symptom of cleverness she had ever shown. After her came Marvel, who really did wonders with *her* dolls—and after Marvel came Mr. Kitts. He was found out presently, principally on account of the silence that had marked him for its own during the past ten minutes. Old Lady Blaine, who walked up and down amongst the workers at this fashionable Dorcas meeting like a queen of the grand old order we are accustomed to dream of when we fall into reminiscences of our childhood, was the first to discover him.

He was sitting in a deserted corner with a basket of naked dolls before him, ready to be dressed. Lulu and her cousin Horace were evidently delighted with the work on which he was engaged, and sat like little mice at his feet, so absorbed that they did not notice the approach of the old marchioness. Lady Blaine drew near, looked over the unconscious Kitts' shoulder, and grew instantly severe.

Indeed, the sight that met her gaze was quite sufficient to freeze with horror the mind of any well-regulated woman.

Beside this wicked young man—this betrayer of women's secrets—was a bundle of cotton-wool, out of which innocent material he was fashioning *Bustles!* and attaching them to the simple dolls, whether they would or no.

"Samuel!" said Lady Blaine, with a sternness that made him jump. (Mr. Kitts was the proud possessor of this euphonious name.) "Really, Samuel, I do think you might find something better to do!"

"I might," acknowledged Mr. Kitts, who was closely related to her, with profound melancholy; "or," with a sudden accession of cheerfulness, "worse!"

"Lulu, come here," said Lady Blaine, drawing the child away from such pernicious teachings. Miss Verulam followed her but slowly.

"But what's the harm, grannie?" She always called the old lady by this endearing title, though indeed she was nothing to her. "Don't you wear one yourself?"

"My dear, that is not the question."

"But don't you, though?" persisted Lulu, who had quite a genius for running her prey to earth.

"You speak too much, Lulu," said Lady Blaine correctively, with a view to self-defence. "Have you never heard that 'little girls should be——'"

"I know that!" said Miss Verulam contemptuously; "I can say that myself. 'Little girls should be seen and not heard.' But Mr. Kitts says that is all wrong. *He* has a copybook in which it goes quite different like; it is—'Little girls should be heard and not seen.' I like that better. We wouldn't ever have to be dressed then, would we?"

"Oh, Samuel!" said Lady Blaine to the stricken Kitts, who was bending over his bustles and shaking with something that resembled palsy. Then she returned to Lulu. "Never to be dressed!" she said mournfully. She pointed to a row of ghastly dolls, naked, hideous, that lay on a table near. "Would you be like that?" she asked.

"I *couldn't* be like that," said Lulu, with much indignation, and then, overcome by the comic side of the affair, "it would be lovely in summer," she said, with a burst of

laughter. Her eyes having wandered to the table where the melancholy dolls lay, went still further afield, and looked with a growing wonderment on all these dainty ladies poring over their work as though their lives depended upon the accomplishment of it. A sudden thought seemed to strike her. "Grannie," said she, turning to Lady Blaine with a perplexed air, "why do they do it? Why do they work like that, dressing those dolls? Couldn't they buy them dressed, as I do?"

"Certainly, my dear. But these friends of ours think they would like to do something for the poor besides buying them things. They want to work for them. You know there is far a greater sweetness in being actively kind than passively so."

"I shouldn't like Mrs. Geraint to be kind to me," said Miss Verulam promptly, pointing the finger of scorn at the doll that soulful woman had just ruined.

"Hush, my dear," said Lady Blaine, rather in a hurry. "But do you know, Lulu, ugly as you think that doll, there are many hundreds of little girls who would think it beautiful, because they have never had one at all."

"*What!* Never any doll?"

"No, my dear, never. I could tell you a story about one little girl, at all events, who——"

"A story? Take me up quick," said Miss Verulam, scrambling into the old lady's lap at full speed. A story was her dear delight. "Now, go on," said she, when she had tucked herself comfortably into Lady Blaine's arm.

"Well, it was not in this village it happened, but in a village very like the one near which I live. And one day a lady—she was an old lady, and she was something like me—walked through this village out to the road beyond, and on the edge of this she came to a small house—nay, a hovel rather—and she stopped before it, and paused and thought how poor and sad the people must be who lived in it, and at last she went in, to—well, to see if she could do anything for them."

"I think she might have done it sooner," said Lulu indignantly. "She was a horrid old woman, I think."

"Oh no, my child; I hope she was not that. They were

not her people, you see—her tenants, I mean—and she could not always walk about, because she was old and sometimes very ill, and besides——"

"Well, never mind about that. If she was ill I'm sorry for her; but did she go in?" asked Lulu impatiently.

"Yes; and the first thing she saw was a little child, about your age, sitting in the middle of the floor nursing tenderly a small dark bundle. At first the old lady could not make out what it was; but by degrees she went closer without frightening the little girl, and she found out it was a bundle of dirty rags tied up together without face, or shape, or form. It had no lovely yellow locks, no big blue eyes. It could not squeak to save its life; there wasn't, indeed, a squeak in it. It could not say mamma or papa, and it hadn't a leg or an arm, yet that poor little child called it Dolly. It was all she had; all she had seen in the way of playthings, and she seemed so much as though a doll were a necessity to her, that I felt quite sorry."

"Oh, where is she? where is she?" cried Lulu, with tears in her eyes. "She shall have my new dolly. Grannie, tell me where she is."

"Evidently you have not much faith in that old lady," said the marchioness smiling. "Why all that happened three years ago."

"Did it?" in a tone of distinct disappointment. "Oh, I see. And did the old lady give her a doll, then?"

"Yes, a very big doll, as beautifully dressed as yours. She sent it to her on Christmas Eve; and soon afterwards she walked again through that village and to that very same house."

"She saw the child?"

"She did. She was sitting on the floor this time, too, and beside her was spread a large clean check handkerchief that I think her mother must have washed specially for the purpose, and on it was the doll, lying out in state. The little one sat looking at it with quite a rapture in her eyes, and, do you know, though that old lady had tried to do a few kind deeds in her lifetime—though far too few—she seldom, I think, felt more pleasure for the doing of them than when she saw that child's glad little face."

"Was it you, grannie? Ah! yes, I'm *sure* it was. Put down your face this minute till I give you a kiss for that. I wonder if there's any little child here that I could give my doll to?"

"You could give it to the Christmas tree, and then it would go to some little girl who would, I am sure, be overjoyed to get it. That will be serving God, my dear, in a small way. You remember the Bible tells us how, when on earth, children especially were very precious to Him."

"But perhaps they aren't so precious now?"

"Yes, quite as dear in His sight."

"Well, if so, and if they want dolls, why doesn't He let them down through the roof to them at night?—He might put them in their stockings."

This was rather puzzling. Miss Verulam had evidently, in her astute mind, mixed up the man with the palsy, Santa Claus, and the Divine power, in an inextricable confusion.

"Because that would not be good for us," said Lady Blaine, blundering out of it as best she could. "If He did all, we could do nothing; and it is our sacred duty to look after the poor, whom we have always with us." She spoke with simple piety.

"Is that it?" said the child. She pondered for a while, and then: "And only for that He would *love* to shower down toys upon the little poor children?"

She looked at Lady Blaine with a keen inquiry.

"Yes," said that old lady, feeling herself brought to bay.

"Then I think it is very self-denying of God," said the child solemnly.

Lady Blaine kissed her and put her down, whereupon she instantly returned to Mr. Kitts and the bustles.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"What is love worth, pray?
Worth a tear?"

* * * * *

"How precious to me have been the prattlings of little children."

"WELL, you have all done so wonderfully well, been so strictly industrious, that I think you deserve a cup of tea," said Lady Lucy. The men had brought in the tea a few minutes before, with the tiny steaming cakes on their brass tripods, and the little American doug-hnuts after which the soul of Mr. Kitts hankered ceaselessly.

A short spell of idleness followed. Down went the needles, off went the thimbles; each fair worker threw up her head and sighed profoundly, as though worn out by labour severe and prolonged. Mrs. Scarlett put aside her work for good and all, and carried off her tea and Lord Wriothesley to the distant end of the conservatory, and there kept them. All the world had seen him go; no one had known why he went. It was willingly, at all events; and for the matter of that, it was easy to guess the attraction too. Not one there but remembered his old infatuation for her; and so they all kept the conversational ball rolling with a kindly desire to prove to his wife that they saw nothing of what was going on in the conservatory.

It was impossible, however, *not* to see. Mrs. Scarlett was talking in a very impressive manner, and Wriothesley was listening with evident interest. Mrs. Verulam's heart grew hot within her with wrath suppressed, and Nigel Savage with a quick indrawing of his breath looked at Marvel.

He had honestly tried to keep away from her all this past week. He had seen her avoidance of him, an avoidance that distressed her, and that she tried to atone for by kind and friendly glances thrown to him now and then. But it had hurt him nevertheless, and he had rather helped her to a continuance of it than sought to overcome it. But now, as he saw her sitting somewhat apart from the others with drooping head and a sad melancholy in all her

bearing, he could no longer succumb to his pride, but broke its bond with one effort and went straight to her.

"What have I done to you?" he began. "How have I offended you, that you will not look at me or speak to me?"

"Has it seemed to you like that? I did not mean it so," replied she, with gentle sorrow. "But that old foolish story returns to me always, and I fear—that——"

"Shall I go away?" said he. "Would that make you happier? Out of the country, I mean?"

"Oh, no; do not," said she, with such evident earnestness that his heart began to beat faster. She looked at him with open entreaty in her large eyes. "I have so *few* friends," she said a moment later, with a forlorn little smile.

"You have one at least who would do much for you," he said. He had it on his lips to say "who would die for you," but he was afraid to risk that sweet old assurance.

"I know it," she said softly. "I rely upon you so much that I know you will not be angry with me because I seem to shun you. But Cicely told me I could not be too cautious, and that I was not to talk exclusively to you. Not that I ever did *that*, I think," looking at him anxiously.

"Mrs. Verulam is a woman of unbounded wisdom," said Savage a little bitterly. "I suppose we must abide by her decision; but, after all, is there such great need? Do you think Lord Wriothesley would object to your treating me as, say, an ordinary acquaintance? To please him and satisfy his mind is it absolutely necessary that I should be denied a word, a glance now and again—that I should be put aside as something actually unworthy?"

"You are offended with me," said Marvel in a low tone. She trifled nervously with the spoon in her saucer, and he could see that her hand was trembling, yet, because of a sort of anger against her in his heart he would not come to her rescue.

"I think I am the most unhappy person alive," she said at last, lifting her eyes to his—they were full of tears. "My life is a ruined life. Hope I have none; such things as should be mine I have lost, through no fault, I *think*, of my own. And now—I shall lose you too."

"Never!" said Savage, with a little outburst of feeling. He could not subdue that, but he *did* subdue what might have followed on it. "What I mean only is this—you give me a chance, you see, to speak, when you say your life is ruined—if your life is lonely, why should you increase the desolation of it? Why cast from you those who might help to brighten it? If—if he—who should be the one to fill your existence leaves it empty, I think that you——"

"I cannot be angry with you," interrupted she gently. "But—if you would only not speak about it. You blame him, but if you think of all, everything, you will see that there is much to be said on his side of the question. When I remember——" She paused, and then broke out miserably, "And that is always—*always*—I think, I feel as though I could forgive him all."

"*Even that?*" asked Savage quickly, with a meaning glance at the open conservatory, where sat Wriothesley and Mrs. Scarlett. When he had said it he would have given the world to recall it, but it was too late then. A sudden flood of crimson rushed to her face, lingered a moment and receded, leaving her white as the snow falling so steadily outside. She cast one wounded look at him, no more, but it drove him frantic.

"Do not take it like that, I beseech you," he said, turning his back completely on the room and standing so as to shield her from observation. "I would far rather die than hurt you. Lady Wriothesley, I entreat, I implore you to forgive that brutal question."

"*You* speak of death very lightly," said she, "you who do not mean what you say. But I——" Her lips were trembling, there was not a vestige of colour in her face—"I *do* mean it, and I wish to Heaven now that I were dead and cold within my grave."

She grew so pale that he thought she was going to faint. He thought of the gossip, the whispering, the insulting pity that would follow a scene of any kind, and he stooped over her on pretence of taking her cup, and pressed her hand warningly.

"Don't give way, whatever you do," he said. "Think of her—her triumph! And—they will talk, these others.

Do you think you could manage to come with me to the drawing-room—anywhere?"

"You are wrong," she said, forcing herself to speak and look up; "I shall not betray myself as you fear. "What!" with a tremulous smile, "will you not grant me any pride? I should not have spoken as I did; it was wrong, absurd of me, but there are moments when one loses oneself, and, though I regret it, it has been a relief to me."

"From my soul *I* regret it," said he remorsefully.

"Do not," said she, with a sigh. "But since you have driven me to speech, hear me. That which you hinted at," with a slight shudder—"*all*, should, I think, be forgiven by me, had I the magnanimity to do it. He does not care for me, and yet but for me——"

"Not care for you!"

"Is that to be so greatly wondered at? Think of what I am. I, unknown, a woman without position—without," her voice sank, and so did her eyes, poor child, "*a name!* Oh!" she turned to him, a very agony of shame and regret in her expression, with her lips compressed and her fingers so tightly interlaced that the blood receded from them, "would any man care to marry such an one as I am?"

"Any man? Marvel! Marvel! Are you *mad* to tempt me like this?" cried he beneath his breath, his eyes aflame. He bent over her.

"Tempt!" she repeated breathlessly, a sudden terror creeping into her face. She drew back, and this impulsive shrinking from him woke him to a sense of the danger he was incurring more than all else she could have said or done.

"Tempt me to anger you again by censuring him whom you so nobly defend," he said with a heavy sigh.

He was bending over her, his face agitated, whilst hers was white and full of melancholy, when Lord Wriothesley came out of the conservatory. His brow was clouded as he appeared on the threshold, but it grew positively black, as if with evil doubts confirmed, as his glance fell on Marvel and Savage. The latter protected Marvel from the observation of the rest of the people in the room by

standing before her, but from where Wriothesley stood she was distinctly visible; and the glance he fixed on her was full of passionate anger.

"She evidently didn't agree with him," said Mr. Kitts to himself *sotto voce*, alluding not to Marvel but to Mrs. Scarlett. He was sitting near the entrance to the conservatory with Miss Verulam on his knee, and a humming-top in process of being wound in his hands, and had caught the first glimpse of Wriothesley's wrathful expression.

"Eh!" said Lulu pricking up her ears. She had, as I have said, a fatal talent for pursuing any subject that interested her, to the bitter end.

"I was merely observing," said Mr. Kitts, "that the air of that conservatory doesn't seem to have agreed with Lord Wriothesley."

"Nonsense!" declared Miss Verulam flatly. "The air in there is as sweet as sugar. It smells of nothing but the most lovely things."

"Which only goes to prove an unpleasant but undeniable truth, that lovely things are, as a rule, bad for us. See how ill he looks."

"I don't believe it. I won't," said Lulu, struggling down off his knee. "It isn't one bit true. I'll go and ask him myself."

"Ask him what?" said Mr. Kitts softly; holding her, however, lightly but firmly, as an awful suspicion crossed his mind.

"If the air of that nice conservatory made him ill, and if it is true that lovely things are bad for him."

"My good child, you can't do that!" exclaimed Mr. Kitts, holding her now with a frenzied grasp. "It would mean a moral earthquake. Battle, murder and sudden death would follow upon it. Lulu, be advised, be warned——"

"I won't. I don't care," cried Miss Verulam valiantly, kicking hard now to regain dear liberty. She scented battle in the breeze, and rose to the occasion. She felt herself forcibly detained, and that, as all little children know, sets the blood a-boiling. "Let me go! Let me go!" said she indignantly, and then with the fatal instinct of

childhood, that told her now where her strength lay, "If you don't I'll scream it out loud to him."

"But not if I give you a knife. A grand large knife, with a corkscrew and four blades. Sharp; will cut you; cut your friends; cut anything—*everything!* Think of that *knife.*" Mr. Kitts poured out all this volubly in the very desperation of fear.

"Eh!" said Miss Verulam, visibly relenting. She had ceased to struggle; she was regarding him with a judicial eye.

"Such a knife as you never yet saw. A very prince amongst knives," went on the unfortunate Kitts, afraid to draw breath. "Is it a bargain? Will that knife purchase your silence?"

"Will you give me that one—the one with the four blades?"

"Certainly. I'll swear it, madam, an' you will. But you must promise me in turn that you will not say a word of what I said just now about the conservatory to Lord Wriothesley or to Lady Wriothesley either, specially to Lady Wriothesley. You promise?"

"Yes, to be sure," said she with fine contempt. "Why, what a fuss about nothing. And now where's the knife?"

"You shall have it. I'll write to town for it in the morning. It will be a most appropriate Christmas present," said Mr. Kitts, with a poor attempt at jocularity. "I only hope it will be half as sharp as you are, and it will be a knife beyond price."

"That was a near shave!" he gasped to himself presently as he mopped his heated brow.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"My life is a fault at last, I fear—
It seems too much like a fate, indeed!
Though I do my best I shall scarce succeed,
But what if I fail of my purpose here?"

"THAT fellow is in love with her!" said Wriothesley suddenly. He faced Mrs. Verulam as he spoke, and looked

at her with a frowning brow, as though daring her to deny it. He had made his way, the morning after the idealized Dorcas meeting, to the pretty private room always set apart for Cicely on her visits to her sister-in-law, and now stood glowering at her from the admirable elevation of six foot one. Glowering, however, had never very much effect on Mrs. Verulam, and to-day, as administered by Wriothesley, it gave her only a meek joy.

"What fellow?" she asked, wrinkling her pretty brows as if in perplexity.

"You know: Savage."

"Oh!" long drawn out. "That of *course.*"

"Why of course," hotly.

"Because she is so charming," coldly. "If you go into it I could name you at least three or four others who would be only too happy to lay themselves and their very considerable fortunes at her feet to-morrow."

"You talk of her as though she were an unmarried girl."

"That is how they talk of her too. You see she was so *little* married! *She* was *en evidence* if you like, but—where were you?"

"I was in South America," stiffly, giving a direct answer, as if to show he scorned apology.

"Quite so," said she cheerfully. "And they knew it, most of them. They quite clung to that knowledge. Your coming home was a terrible blow, as unexpected as it was undesired."

"By her?"

"We are talking of those foolish people who have lost their hearts to her, if, indeed, men *have* hearts," said she with a little shrug. "I assure you, your return was a distinct *bêtise;* you should have surrendered yourself to a grizzly over there, wherever you were, in that delightfully enthralling place that kept you from her for nearly two years."

"You think, then, that I am in her way?"

"I think there are men who would treat her better than you have done."

"You are, at all events, very plain spoken. A charm, no doubt, but an unpalatable one. I do not quarrel with you

about that, however, it would be useless, as I can see your sympathies are enlisted on—my wife's—side."

"Your *what?* Oh! Marvel! Positively, one is so unaccustomed to think of her as a woman with a husband, that I hardly understood."

"You have grown bitter, Cicely. A gain on which I can scarcely congratulate you. Of course, as I have said, you have adopted Marvel's cause, and I cannot hope for a fair hearing from you. You believe me altogether to blame in this matter that lies—that at least *should* lie—between her and me alone. Yet you should remember, in all common honesty, that it was she who first tired of me."

"Nonsense. I suppose you didn't imagine she was going to stay with you, to watch you, day after day, moping, and sulking, and regretting another woman every hour of the day. Allow her some *little* spirit!"

"She is hardly deficient in that line, I think," said he with a sneer that enraged her champion.

"She is the gentlest creature alive, and the most lovable. If you cannot see that, I pity you; but *her*, more. What would you have? An angel? She is almost that, I believe. Would any one but her have received you with the exquisite forgiveness that she showed?"

"Forgiveness! Why, she has treated me ever since as though I were the dust beneath her feet. Call *that* forgiveness!"

"You are not able to appreciate her, because she is too good for you. I would have you take care, however—*other people can!*" She grew quite terrible in her denunciation of him, and in this hint, that drove him to deeper anger than he already felt.

"To talk like that," he said, "is a simple thing; any one could do it. But there is always the other side to be considered. And I—have *I* nothing to forgive?"

"Nothing that I know of. I wonder you can even *pretend* to it!" said she scornfully. She turned more directly towards him and lifted indignant eyes to his. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself," she said. "I really do think you might give up that old flirtation *now*."

"What do you mean by that?" asked he quickly.

"As you remarked a moment since, I am plain spoken. What I mean then is, your most ill-advised flirtation with Mrs. Scarlett."

"Pshaw!" said he. "I thought you clever enough to see that that old affair is over and done with. If once I *did* love her, I have lived to wonder at it!"

"Denial is a simple thing. Words are no doubt invaluable, but deeds are beyond them. If you wish me to believe what you have just said you should act up to yours."

"Why, what do you want, then? Am I to swear it publicly that I have got rid of that ancient infatuation?"

"Never lose your temper!" said Mrs. Verulam mildly. "It gains one nothing, and so is valueless. 'Deeds not words' is a good old motto belonging to some one or other; I would have you bear it in mind. If you wish me to believe you in this matter of Mrs. Scarlett, tell me why you devoted yourself to her all last evening in the conservatory, withdrawing yourself from all the others, and making yourself as conspicuous with her as you very well could."

"There were certain things that had be to said to her, and it was as well I should say them at once. I wished her to understand."

"Well, I hope you obtained your wish," said Cicely drily, "and that it will not be necessary to make her 'understand' again."

"I hope not also. But at all events," gloomily, "she made *me* understand."

"Did she? She is certainly capable of a good deal," said Mrs. Verulam, regarding him keenly. "Did she tell you that Marvel was in love with Nigel Savage?"

"I did not require her assistance to learn that. As I came out of the conservatory I saw her with—him—Savage! If she hates me, as she does," said he vehemently, "and if she tells him so, I think she might have the decency to do it in private! Her look—the dejection that marked her face! Shall I ever forget it!"

"I hope you won't," said Mrs. Verulam wrathfully. "I hope it will haunt you, for it is all your doing. You can

traduce that sweet girl—that *child*, as you will, but all your foolish disbelief, and all that woman's villainy, will not be able to lay her beautiful head in the dust. Oh, Fulke! That you should be so blinded to all that is good and true!"

"You condemn me without a hearing. You accuse me of being unfair to Marvel, and of being unduly civil to Mrs. Scarlett; but as I tell you there were certain things that *should* be said to the latter."

"And how to the former? I don't see why *anything* should be said to Mrs. Scarlett; though I think there is a great deal that should be said to Marvel. You can fling away your own chances of happiness, of course, as recklessly as you will, but in the dead flatness that will follow on it, remember how I warned you."

"Those chances are no longer mine," said he gloomily; so gloomily that she believed his thoughts ran on the woman he had loved two years ago.

"So much the better for you," said she.

"You acknowledge that it is so, then?"

"I am certainly not going to discuss it with you," said she indignantly. "What I alone desire to impress upon you is, that Marvel noticed your devotion to Mrs. Scarlett last night, and was both annoyed and offended by it. Very naturally."

"Pshaw!" said he contemptuously. "I don't believe she would care if I devoted myself to Mrs. Scarlett all day long. She treats me with absolute indifference."

"Pity she doesn't bow down to you and solicit your love!" said Mrs. Verulam hotly, who was now in fine scolding order, and prepared to say a great many things that she called "wholesome truths," but which certainly would have disagreed terribly with Wriothesley.

Providence, however, in the solid shape of Lady Lucy, entered the room, and put an end to Wriothesley's *mauvais quart d'heure*.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"And my eyes hold her! What is worth
The rest of heaven, the rest of earth?"

"WHY not send back the carriages, and let us all walk home through the woods?" said Savage with some animation, addressing Mrs. Dameron. "I should think we've got all the birds we are likely to get to-day."

"Yes; cover's used up," said Lord Verulam in his lazy way. He was a man who very seldom spoke: a trick, as you will notice, acquired by men who have very talkative wives.

The snow that fell last week was now almost forgotten. It ceased as suddenly as it began; sharp rains followed upon it; and they in turn gave place to a severe but wholesome frost that had left the ground as hard as iron. All the men of the party had been out since dawn shooting one of the home covers, and at two o'clock had been joined by the gentler members, who had driven to a keeper's lodge armed with numerous baskets and hampers, wherewith to allay the pangs of hunger of the mighty hunters.

Luncheon was over now, and indeed the day was declining. The footmen were going about putting up the plates and dishes, and the keeper's wife was carrying off the fragments that remained for the delectation of her numerous offspring, who were huddled out of sight in some of the other rooms. The luncheon party had long ago emerged into the sombre twilight that awaited them outside, and were looking with evident half-heartedness at their guns.

"Charming evening for a walk," said Mr. Kitts brightening visibly under Savage's suggestion. "Lady Lucy, head our list of patrons, and our procession too, through the melancholy twilight of the lonely wood."

"*I* can't," said she laughing. "I have got these chicks to see to," pointing to a couple of her smaller fry who were fighting valiantly in the background. "But if the others wish to—— Cicely, what of you? How goes your vote—a drive home or a walk?"

"A walk by all means," said Mrs. Verulam, "it is barely half-past three, and it is troubling me how to kill time till tea is due."

"You can have it now," said Lord Verulam. "Mrs. Machell (the keeper's wife) will get it ready for you in no time."

"No, thanks, no; no senna for me," said Mrs. Verulam. "But a walk in the gloaming, by all means. It is only a three-mile trot from this to Verulam, I *think?*" She looked round for confirmation of her words to Savage, who stood near.

"Hopeless looking to me," he said, shaking his head, "I don't know the ropes round here. Ask Kitts, he is a perfect encyclopædia of learning."

"Three miles and a half as the crow flies, and if you follow *me*," he said. "About ten, if you follow your own vagaries O! and take an unguarded turn to your left or right."

"I'll follow you," said Mrs. Verulam with decision.

"So will I," said Sir George; "in your company, if I *may;*" this in a lower tone to Cicely.

They all paired off presently, except unfortunately, Marvel, who had stayed to say a word or two to Lady Lucy and help the children into the carriage, the youngest of whom had conceived a violent fancy for her, and could only be induced to enter the waiting landau through a mistaken and carefully fostered idea that she was to enter it with him. When this latest of her devoted adherents was safely locked up she turned to find all the others of the party had already started and were quite a long way ahead, and that Nigel Savage alone remained to accompany her. She flushed vividly, and Savage at once came to the conclusion that she was annoyed at being thus irremediably thrown upon his hands. He was wrong, however. She gave him no thought, all her girlish jealous heart being oppressed with the fear that Wriothesley was with Mrs. Scarlett. She caught Savage's eye and smiled kindly at him.

"We shall have to run," she said, pointing to the group just disappearing round the corner in the distance, "if

we mean to catch them up. If we don't we shall probably lose ourselves like the babes in the wood, as neither of us know much about the country here."

"We are too near home to get very much lost," said he, "and as long as they give us a lead, even at so great a distance, we shall, at all events, be sure to come in at last, if only as a bad third."

When they reached the corner, however, there was no sign of the others. Two paths lay before them, one running a little to the left, where Verulam ought to lie, and in both there was a sharp bend a good deal farther on, that would hide the advance party if they had gained it. Savage stood still and looked perplexed.

"Rapid people!" he said at last, with a rather amused laugh. "I think they might at least have given us a passing thought."

"I wish I had not delayed so long," said Marvel, "but Lady Lucy is such a chatterbox, and little Leslie so terribly *exigeant*. After all," laughing, "there are certain drawbacks about having so hopelessly devoted a lover."

Savage looked suddenly into her clear eyes. The words were tinged by coquetry, and would have meant a challenge from another woman, but Marvel's soft laugh and unconscious gaze acquitted her of any *arrière pensée*.

"This must be the path," she said, pointing to the left, "I am sure Verulam lies over there."

"We may as well take it, at all events, until we meet a rustic to set us right," said Savage, and they walked briskly through the bare deserted wood, the dry and frozen leaves crackling beneath their feet as they went. The short brown grasses and yellowing moss that edged each side of the pathway were tipped with frost and sparkled coldly in the dying light. Some rooks were cawing in a half-hearted fashion above their heads amongst the leafless boughs of the elms; and far away in the distance could be heard the loud angry roar of a cascade as it dashed down the sides of the granite rocks.

It was a cold sharp evening, but dry and crisp, and the quick pace at which they moved set Marvel's blood aglow. A warm flush sprang into her cheeks, her eyes gleamed;

she looked the very essence of youth and health and beauty as she walked beside him, straight and upright as a young ash sapling. "White as a white rose," with soft sweet mouth and earnest eyes, and pretty ruffled hair blowing about the broad pure brow. The dark rich furs she wore, and dainty laces, enhanced the clear beauty of her perfect skin, and the little fur cap she wore sat closely to her small head. She looked indeed specially lovely on this dull wintry evening (in spite of the faintly troubled expression that always now lay in her eyes), and contrasted brilliantly with the general air of greyness that pervaded everything.

Savage walked beside her silently. He was very well content to be with her, though she never broke the silence, content to see her, to feel her near. Yet sometimes he wondered how it would all end. Was she to live her life unloved, unloving; chained to a man who did not value her, who had spent his first best passion on a woman as false, as worthless as any of the modern Delilahs he had ever met. It seemed to him that there was cruelty in such a decision. How long would she rest contented with a life so empty? Oh, that he had met her two years ago, with a clear chance before him! He felt that the very strength of the love he bore her would have compelled her love in return!

Even now, seeing her so forlorn, so neglected, a passionate longing to declare that love was always pressing upon him. *If* she knew, would she care—would she turn to him? There was a terrible temptation in the doubt that surrounded the answer to this question. He believed her heart untouched. He desired beyond all other good to awaken it to thoughts of him! and yet he dared not. Passion was unknown to her. What then, if she shrank from him in fear and loathing! He told himself that he could not survive that; better this calm, exquisite, unsatisfying friendship, than eternal banishment from all the earth held dear for him.

No; she would not understand. She was not as those other women of his world, women who would, perhaps, have held him at arm's length too, but would not have rated his sin as a very unpardonable offence. With her, he knew it

would mean banishment. He glanced at her pure soft profile in the growing dusk, and read his fate there.

"Thou whose peerless
Eyes are tearless,
And thy thoughts as cold sweet lilies."

No, she would not understand. Thick and fast the shadows grew, and there before them, looming in their path, rose, all on a sudden as it were, a tall old tower, ivy-covered, moss-grown, picturesque as a mediæval dream. The grey mists of the coming night seemed already to have caught it, and bathed its ancient walls in a tremulous haze that gave it a touch of weird and rather unreal beauty.

"How lovely," said Marvel. "How is it we have not seen it before? Was there ever so quaint an old tower! I wonder if we could get into it. Oh, *do* let us try? See, it is quite close to us, it won't take us more than a yard or two out of our way."

"It is growing late," said he, with stern virtue. It flashed across his mind that this divergence from his duty and his path would be both desirable and pleasant, considering it would give him so much more of her undivided society, but he suppressed the thought with a determination that did him credit.

"It isn't late, really! It is only because it is December," said she, still bent on exploring the old ruin that had taken her fancy. "Come, let us just look into it. We can make up for the delay by a good run afterwards, that will warm us."

Thus tempted, he fell.

"So we can," said he, with very suspicious alacrity, taking into account his hesitation of a moment since. After all it would only take them a minute or two to look into the mouldy old place, and if it pleased her——. They ran across the grass and presently found themselves opposite a worm-eaten old door, studded with huge iron nails, and with a rusty key in the lock. After using considerable force this key was induced to turn. The door opened with astonishing suddenness as if loose on its hinges, and they stepped

inside into a dark passage that smelled of mouldering leaves and the dust of a century gone by.

It was very dark. No light came from any ground-floor windows, for the simple reason that there were none, but a faint ray or two stole down the circular staircase that led to a chamber above lit by some long narrow openings in the walls barely wide enough to let a man's body slip sideways through them.

"Isn't it funny!" said Marvel, who was plainly delighted with it: "I wonder what is upstairs?" She ran lightly up the worn stone steps and stood at the top, looking round her in the uncertain light. It was a semi-circular apartment, with a stone floor and a huge wide fireplace facing the stairs. It was a small hall rather than a room, as there was no door to it, and only a broken rudely formed stone parapet ran from the top of the stairs to the wall behind, to prevent the unwary from falling over into the abyss beneath.

"One feels as though one had just stepped into another age," said Marvel, looking eagerly round her.

"A dark one," said Savage.

"What a shame to take no notice of so interesting a place. A very little thought and trouble would transform it into something quite unique; an oak chair there, a table here, a roaring fire, a——"

"A few window panes," suggested Savage.

"Tut, you are too prosaic! Well, in the summer, then, could you fancy a cooler, a more calm retreat? Not a fly to aggravate one, not a sound to disturb——"

At this moment there came a sound from below loud enough to awaken the Seven Sleepers. It was a regular bang that seemed to shake the tower to its foundations and made both its occupants start.

"So much for your calm retreat," said Savage with a rather nervous laugh. He had good reason to feel nervous.

CHAPTER XL.

"Worth how well those dark grey eyes,
That hair so dark and dear, how worth
That a man should strive and agonize.
And taste a very hell on earth
For the hope of such a prize!"

"WHAT was that?" exclaimed Marvel.

"Sounded like a door, didn't it?" said he with a carefully careless air.

"Why, that's what it was," cried she laughing. "How stupid of me not to guess it at once. That solid old piece of oak downstairs was just the sort of thing to shut to, with a noise like a thunder-clap."

"I'll run down and see if I was right in my conjecture," said he, suiting the action to the word. When he got below he found his worst fears confirmed. The heavy old door had swung back, obedient to some gust of wind, and, shutting with considerable force, had shot the lock into its place. The key was on the outside, and there was therefore no earthly means of getting out of this unlucky tower, unless by chance some passer-by might come this way.

And what a chance was that! Savage felt the blood mount to his brow in the dark passage. He noted how the dying day was already dead, and that the coming darkness was even now beginning to cover all the land. Good heavens! what was to be done?

"Well!" cried the sweet clear voice above; "are you going to spend the rest of our short time below there? See, here is *such* a cupboard."

He mounted the steps very slowly. He knew he was afraid to tell her, yet it had to be done.

"Such a delicious little hiding-hole," cried she, standing near the tiny recess she had discovered in the wall. "Just large enough to hold a few choice cups and saucers, and—— Oh, by-the-by, talking of cups, I expect we shall lose our tea if we don't make haste. Come—let us go."

"Well, that's just it," said he slowly, his eyes on the

ground, his manner really wonderfully unconcerned; "the fact is—we can't!"

"What!"

"That solid old oak door you admired so much a few minutes ago has played us a rather unkind trick. It has shut itself up so tight that, like Sterne's starling, we can't get out."

He spoke calmly, yet with secret trepidation, not knowing how she would take it. He was a good deal surprised when he did know. She sat down on one of the stone benches that were built into the walls and laughed.

"How absurd!" she said. "Do you mean that we are prisoners?"

"It really amounts to that," said he gravely, a little off his guard because of his astonishment at her evident unconcern. She noticed the gravity at once, and her laughter forsook her. Still, for all that, one could see that she did not entirely realize the exact meaning of the situation.

"Oh, it can't be true;" she said hastily. "There must be some way of inducing it to open. A sudden shake may do it. Did you try?"

"I did—with all my might, but nothing came of it." He was now disheartened by her sudden change of manner. How was he to allay the fears that each passing five minutes was sure to bring? "After all, it is of no real consequence," he said; "it is early yet, and somebody going through the wood will let us out in time to scamper home for tea. You are one of the few people who can run, I know."

"Well, I hope your somebody will come soon," said she after a very slight pause. There was so evident an effort to treat the matter lightly that his heart died within him. He knew that already she was afraid!

A shrill wind was rising. Now, in its babyhood, it merely sighed amongst the trees, but gave brave promise of a strength in age. Savage, leaning against the wall near one of the openings, looked out gloomily into the growing night and tried in vain to think of something light, casual, to say, that would persuade her he at least was under no apprehension.

"I am glad we are in so public a part of the grounds," he said at last; "it would have been a little awkward if we had been shut up in a more isolated spot."

"Oh, yes," said she so cheerfully that his spirits rose; "I was just now thinking about that. Some one is sure to come—now—at any moment."

Yet many moments went by and no one came. No sound broke upon their ear save the hoarse croaking of the rooks as they quarrelled with the empty branches now swaying wildly to and fro in the angry vehemence of the growing storm.

"What o'clock is it now?" asked she after a pause, that to him had seemed an eternity, yet he could not have broken it. He knew, if she did not, the danger of the gossip that already attached his name to hers, and he loved her too well and too sincerely not to dread the first edge to it that this unfortunate imprisonment would give.

"I can hardly see," he said taking out his watch and pretending to examine it by a light now almost gone; "but —about half-past four I make it. Quite early yet, as I have said."

"It is five," said she very gently. She too had a watch and was looking at it, as he found to his dismay. "Oh! Nigel, do you think it will be very much longer before any one comes?"

"Why, any second may bring some one," said he brightly, stretching his head out of the opening beside him as if it was quite a sure thing that peasants would be walking about the wood in the cold chill evening, and that he might as well therefore be on the look-out to hail them.

He was glad to be able to thrust out his head somewhere that would prevent her reading his face, even in this declining light. A sickening certainty that *no one will come* is rendering him so miserable, that he hardly dares to glance in the direction where she sits so curiously quiet. What terrible fate threw them into this fatal situation!

He looked far and wide, but saw nothing save the endless masses of trees. After awhile he drew himself in, and sank upon the stone bench near him. He waited breathlessly for her to ask him if he had seen anything, but when the

minutes passed and she still kept silence he was unspeakably thankful.

The storm had come at last, and now a great wind rose and shook the pines. Like thunder it rolled amongst the hills, and swept with an eager fury round the old tower wherein they sat, speechless, expectant. Faint flashes of light glanced through the darkling woods and stone bay now and then with a lurid brilliance upon the projecting masonry of one of the walls. All nature seemed alive; the sea itself was stirred. Moans heavy and sorrow-laden came from it and rushed inland, as it darted itself with each wild, incoming wave against the adamantine breasts of the eternal rocks.

Minute followed upon minute, until all the weary mass of them grew into an hour. Twice Marvel had spoken to him with a would-be hopeful tone, but with a cruel trembling of the beloved voice that drove him almost mad. The awful thought that no one would ever come or come too late began to render him wretched. What if they should be left here—alone, until the morning dawned!

He sprang to his feet and began to walk feverishly up and down.

The open agitation he thus betrayed communicated itself to her. She roused herself from the lethargy into which she had apparently fallen, and in her turn rose to her feet.

"Nigel," she said in a piercing voice, "where are you, I can't see you." She held out her hands to him. "Oh! Nigel, what is to be done? Dear, dear Nigel, think of something!"

He went to her and caught her hands.

"Above all things don't give way," he said. "After all what is it but an accident; a mere *fiasco*, that a word or two will set right. You are trembling, sit down again and let us think what is best to be done."

He had no knowledge whatever of how to improve their sorry plight, but he would have said anything just then to soothe and comfort her, as he felt the desperate clinging of her slender fingers. What would be the end of it if no one came?

An answer came to that thought, swift, stinging as sharply

with pleasure as with pain. It almost overpowered him, holding him enthralled by the seductive power of it. *Thus* he might gain her! She would be his, cast into his arms by a disbelieving world, though she stood innocent in word and deed before its tribunal. He trembled as the idea grew upon him, and then, in a second as it were, he shrunk and cowered away from it. With her fair name sullied; her fair fame soiled! Would he win her so? He knew her too well, had gauged her lovely soul too closely, not to be sure that honour lost there would follow a broken heart. Oh! not at that price. No!

He had not been a good man perhaps; there had been passages in his life that would not bear looking into, and upon which he hated to look ever since his eyes first fell on Marvel. But there were germs of goodness in him that that first sight of her, too, had brought to light, and he cast behind him now, in this his hour of temptation, the evil spirit that would have led him to his destruction.

She sat down as he had told her to do, shrinking back out of the ken of his eyes, so that he might not see her, and began to cry, silently but in a deplorable manner. No matter how silently you cry you are sure to be found out in time. Savage woke to the fact that she was in tears in about a minute and a half and despair took possession of him.

"Don't do that!" he said roughly, but with such a passion of regret in his voice that the roughness went for nothing. "There isn't a single thing to be gained by it, and ——; Marvel—don't cry! I," angrily, "I can't stand it. Come, be sensible and listen to what I am going to say."

She roused herself somewhat, and leant towards him with an eager expectancy that touched him.

"If they find you here alone," he went on, "nothing can be said." He paused and as she still remained silent, he believed she did not understand. "By *they*, I mean the women—Mrs. Scarlett and Co.," he explained. "Now supposing—are you listening?—suppose I were to drop from that opening there," pointing to the slit in the thick wall nearest to her, "I might reach the ground beneath without much injury to life or limb; so little injury indeed that I

might even be able to get round to the door and open it and set you free; and at all events, even if I failed in that last hope, no one could say a word to you if I were out of the way."

"If you were killed, you mean! I may be a coward," said she quietly, "but I am not so altogether craven that I would purchase my immunity from scandal with your life."

He could not see her dear face because of the blackness of the night that now had fallen upon them in its might, but he could guess at the generous scorn that marked it.

"You! my best, my truest friend," she said. Again she held out to him her hands, and he caught and clasped them close; love lent him sight. "Do you think I shall ever forget what you and Cicely have been to me—against the world, as it were! But oh, Nigel! what is to be done about this; and you know how she, Mrs. Scarlett, will talk, and——" Once more she broke down. "Oh, can you do nothing, *nothing!*" she cried feverishly. "Think, *think!* Am I to go *mad* with fear, sitting here through all these terrible hours; and what will the morning bring?" She dragged her hands out of his and began to pace wildly up and down, as it overcome by this last awful thought. "Nothing but ruin," she said at last, in a tone that meant only despair.

Despair, too, was his. He drew back a little out of her way, and as he did so his eyes fell upon his gun. He ran to it, quickly loaded it and fired off, with only a short time between each detonation, the two cartridges that remained to him, through one of the openings. It was a last resource, and he wished to heaven he had thought of it before. Better late, however, than never, so he tried to think; but as time went on and no answering shout came from the woods he began to believe they were indeed forsaken by all things, human and divine.

The storm still raged, but with a milder fury, and through a rent in the clouds a dull, pale watery moon showed with a gloomy brilliance. There was still a sobbing amongst the leafless trees, as though it rained, and though the lightning indeed was dead, the whole earth seemed to groan as if beneath a heavy load.

Marvel's thoughts had flown to her husband; careless and indifferent as he was, devoted as she believed him to be to another woman, she had still, in the earlier moments of her incarceration, firmly believed in his ability, no less than his willingness, to come to her rescue. But now she believed in nothing. All hope had gone from her, and she waited in a deadly silence for the passage of a time that should only end with her awaking to a knowledge that a reputation unsullied was no longer hers. Innocent those who knew her best would undoubtedly deem her; but those others! And to be talked about; to be glanced at with the smile, half amused, half severe, that she had seen so often directed at others! No, she could not outlive that.

It was all past bearing indeed; but the bitterest thing was, that *he*, Fulke, had not so far troubled himself as to come to her succour. Perhaps he hoped for a deliverance that might arise out of this luckless night. She grew cold; she shivered as she let this evil idea take possession of her. How earnestly she had prayed at one time to have her miserable marriage set aside, and yet now, when the chance came, how she shrank from it, how she cowered against the ice-cold wall there in the darkness, and pressed her hands against her frozen face, and entreated with a fervour she had never yet known that she might be saved from this horrible fate that seemed to hang over her.

She pictured them all to herself sitting in the cosy fire-lit room drinking their tea, and wondering with prettily uplifted brows where she and Nigel Savage had gone! She could hear Mrs. Scarlett's low satirical little speech, could see Cicely's angry flush and glance of embarrassment, Cicely, who had always hinted that Nigel loved her with a passion undue and undesirable. She could see, too, how Fulke sat beside Mrs. Scarlett in the delicate flickering flames of the fire, and whispered to her, and glanced into her eyes, and so glancing forgot that she—*his wife!*—was here imprisoned, desperate, beyond all hope.

A hand touched hers in the darkness; two lips were pressed to it. She felt by the intensity of the pressure that it was a farewell, but she seemed hardly to care

enough for anything to demand an explanation. Through the opening in the wall near her a ray of sullen moonlight entered, that enabled her to see Nigel walk across the room to the window at the other side. It was plain that he had at last decided on dropping from the window. She knew that a lingering death would be the result of this, and rising quickly from her seat she went to him.

"You will kill yourself and it will be of no use," she said.

"I see no reason why I should be killed," said he lying. "I may break an arm, a leg, but even if so——"

"It will do no good, I tell you," said she in the same low, calm, hopeless tone. "They would not believe. No. Risk nothing in so forlorn a cause. I was born to misfortune; I must fulfil my destiny."

"Such talk is only morbid folly," said he sharply. "You should not encourage it. Unhappy as you may be now, there is always hope in the future."

"In the *immediate* future? I think not," said she with a calmness that betrayed the depth of her misery. "I have a presentiment that no one will come to release us—that no one *cares* to come." Her voice quivered. "That is it," she repeated mournfully. "No one cares."

Almost as the last word left her lips a shout reached them—a shout that rang through the stormy wind without. As they stood trembling, uncertain, it came again, clear and full of vehement anxiety. It sounded nearer this time, and nearer still the next and the next, as it rose incessantly. Savage answered it with all his might, whilst Marvel stood rigid, frightened, yet full of a wild hope.

Suddenly it ceased, that glad sound from without, and both their hearts sank once more. Were they, when help seemed so near, to be again plunged in an ocean of despair.

"Oh! what can have happened!" cried Marvel in terrible distress. Her answer to this was a loud knocking on the door beneath, and the sound of a voice that thrilled through every nerve.

"It is Fulke," said she in a whisper that reached no one. She felt as though she were going to faint, and sank down upon the stone seat near her.

CHAPTER XLI

"Silent we went an hour together,
Under grey skies by waters white,
Our hearts were full of windy weather,
Clouds and blown stars and broken light."

SAVAGE, however, thought of nothing. His one prevailing feeling was that of unutterable relief. He ran down the stone steps, and hammered his hand in turn against the door.

"Is that you, Wriothesley?" he cried. "Thank Heaven you have come. Feel for the key; it is at your side, and let us out."

He spoke with such heartfelt joy that Wriothesley could not but believe he was sincere. He hardly dared to dwell upon the doubts that had haunted him as he ran through the woods, but that they had been of the darkest hue he knew now because of the intensity of the reaction he was enduring. He turned the key in the door as desired, and stood silent upon the threshold.

"Lady Wriothesley, it is your husband; come down," cried Savage, in a quick eager tone that trembled with excitement. It had not occurred to him to explain anything to Wriothesley; he thought only of the comfort her release would be to her. She came down almost immediately, and as she emerged into the windy night, and the few straggling moonbeams betrayed her to him, Wriothesley caught her hand and drew it within his arm.

"I am afraid I must ask you to hurry," he said with icy politeness. "You have spent so much time over that old ruin that I fear we shall be late for dinner."

"For dinner! Is it not over?" asked Marvel quaking. "It seemed— I mean— *What* time is it, then?"

"Seven. We have a mile to walk, and half-an-hour to do it in, the other half I leave for dressing," said he grimly; "so you see you will have to step out."

They did step out in a silence that weighed upon Marvel like lead. Once in its commencement she broke it.

"Seven! I thought it was midnight!" she said with a little bursting sigh. All her tears seemed gone from her now, when she would have given a good deal for the relief of them in the cold and dark of the night when no man could see her; but though her heart seemed bursting, she found no means to ease it.

Wriothesley took no notice of her words. He trudged on in an impenetrable dumbness that frightened her more than all the cutting speeches in the world could have done. The wind still roared around them; the cold was intense; the way through the rough unused pathways almost unbearable, but he took no notice of anything, save that when once she stumbled he clutched her arm more tightly. He asked no questions whatsoever, and appeared quite dead to the fact that Savage walked beside them.

At last the latter could stand it no longer.

"I think it is as well," said he as indifferently as he could, "that you should know how this unhappy delay occurred."

Wriothesley made no reply; he walked on in fact as though he neither heard nor saw the speaker.

"I have no doubt you are annoyed," said Savage quietly, keeping his temper (which was by no means a good one) by a superhuman effort, "but for Lady Wriothesley's sake it is just as well that you should know what happened. We went to look at that tower, found the door open and went in, very naturally, to see what was there. Whilst upstairs the door, driven by a gust of wind, clapped to, the bolt shot into its place, and left us prisoners. Had you not come we should have been prisoners still."

Not a word from Wriothesley.

"You understand?" from Savage, who began to feel that he would like to murder him.

"Entirely," said Wriothesley slowly.

"I regret very much that I have been the cause of considerable anxiety to Lady Wriothesley. It was quite my fault that we entered the tower at all. I hope," stiffly, "that you will believe how very much I reproach myself in this matter."

"I understand that too, and also that your feelings on the subject are not of the slightest consequence."

"It was not Mr. Savage's fault so much as he says," put in Marvel hurriedly in a frightened, nervous tone. "I was the first to express a wish to see that old ruin, and though he dissuaded me and said how late it was, I persisted, and——"

"Nevertheless it was my fault," persisted Savage, defending her from herself rather unwisely; "I knew better than you did the time it would take to reach home, and I should have prevented any deviation from our path."

"Are you apologizing for Lady Wriothesley?" asked Fulke suddenly, in a slow condensed tone that made Marvel's blood run cold. Even Savage seemed impressed by it to an uncomfortable degree.

"Certainly not," he said, however, with considerable spirit. "Apology would be out of place for either her or me. An accident is an accident, no more, no less. I was only afraid you would not be able to grasp the real meaning of a very awkward situation without a word from me. Lady Wriothesley too was afraid her absence might cause remark, and—and of course I think it well you should know exactly how it was that she and I were——"

"Sir!" interrupted Wriothesley with indescribable hauteur; "pray spare yourself further explanation. The door shut to without asking Lady Wriothesley's permission and so kept her prisoner sorely against her will, as I am quite assured. It is quite unnecessary that you should enter into details of any sort. The story begins and ends there. I am perfectly aware, without your seeking to impress it upon me, that Lady Wriothesley of her own accord would never cause her friends anxiety."

Nothing more was said after this. Wriothesley quickened his pace, and Marvel's hand being drawn through his arm she was compelled to hasten hers also. She walked quickly, sometimes almost running, and stumbling over roots of trees that came in her way; sometimes after a little shock of this kind gasping for breath, but Wriothesley never seemed to mind. He strode on in a violent determined fashion, and only once made her a speech that was hardly conciliatory upon the haste he used.

"I am sorry to make you walk at such a rate," he said; "but you see when you squander time you must regain it

one way or another. This is rather a hard way, but it cannot be helped."

At last the lights of Verulam came to her through the trees, and frightened though she was at all that would inevitably await her within doors, she hailed their appearance with delight. She was tired out, cold, almost frozen, and besides once there she could get away from this terrible arm that held her tightly bound to the man she feared and, alas! loved more than any other creature upon earth. How cruel he was to her, yet too, how kind! He had come to her rescue after all, and though it was as she believed only a sense of duty sent him forth, still duty is a noble thing, and those who regard it should be held in honourable account.

They all three reached the steps and entered the hall, the door lying wide open, without encountering any one. Savage turned aside in the direction of the library, where he knew all would be assembled at this hour, and Marvel made direct for the staircase, hoping to escape to her room without a further lecture. Wriothesley forestalled her.

"I should like to speak to you for a moment," he said, "if you will come in here." He did not leave it to her, however, to reject or accept his proposal, because he caught her hand as she hesitated and drew her into the empty morning-room.

CHAPTER XLII.

"I would that you were all to me,
You that are just so much, no more,
Nor yours, nor mine—nor slave, nor free!
Where does the fault lie? what the core
Of the wound, since wound must be?"

MARVEL, with a little chill at her heart and feeling utterly unstrung, followed him. When he had brought her into the room he let her hand go, and closing the door looked hard at her.

"How long is this to go on?" he said in a cold uncompromising tone.

"This? What?" asked she rather confounded. She expected a regular scolding for her misdemeanour of the afternoon, and this question coming so suddenly puzzled her.

"Your friendship with Mr. Savage."

"Don't be angry with Nigel," she said earnestly but timidly. "It was not his fault at all. Oh! yes," putting up her hand as she saw him about to speak with a terrible accession of wrath upon his brow, "I know he said it was, but, indeed, I assure you it was I alone who wanted to see that old tower. He tried even to *keep* me from going there, but it looked so quaint, so lovely in the twilight, that I could not resist it, and then the door closed, as you know, and then," growing agitated, "I thought we should be left there for ever, and—and the time went on until I thought all hope was over, and then you came and—— That was all, indeed. It wasn't that I forgot the time; it was only that I couldn't get home, and I knew you would be angry; but if you had been there yourself you would have been in just the same plight, and—and——"

She stopped dead short, as if choking. She was almost sobbing. She was frightened, terrified in fact, and her breath came quickly through her parted lips. She had clasped her little slender hands upon her bosom as though to still its beatings, and was so altogether and openly afraid of him that Wriothesley was cut to the heart.

"You need not look at me like that," he said. "I believe every word you say. There is no need for you to so excuse yourself. The whole thing was unfortunate—no more." He paused for a moment and then: "I regret very much," he said, "that my presence causes you to feel such extreme nervousness."

He spoke so gently, if coldly, that Marvel, whose nerves were strung to the last pitch by all she had undergone during the afternoon, broke down and burst into tears.

"It is very good of you," she said, sobbing rather wildly. "I am frightened because I thought you would be angry about it, and at one time there seemed no chance of *ever* getting out of that horrid place, and it was not my fault at all. It was nobody's fault. It was only Nigel and I wanted to——"

"I *know*," interrupted he, with a sudden stamp of his foot that was involuntary and full of ill-suppressed passion. "Do not talk any more about it. And, if I were you, I shouldn't cry about it either. There is dinner before you, remember, and all those women will be watching you."

"Oh! I *can't* come down to dinner," cried she miserably, "to be stared at, wondered at. I *will* not! It would be quite different if you and I were as other married people—good friends and that—but they all *know* how it is with us. And they will be talking of it; they have been talking, haven't they?" turning round to him with wide unhappy eyes.

"Whether they have or not is of little consequence. You must certainly come down to dinner," said he with cold authority in his tone. "You have placed yourself in a false position, and all that is left to you now is to face and overcome it."

"If Cicely—— She might perhaps make an excuse for me," faltered she.

"Why should any excuse be made? Are you not well—strong?" coldly. "No, it is quite out of the question."

"I am tired, unnerved; surely——"

"For one who professes strongly to dread public discussion, I must say you have an odd way of showing it. If you absent yourself from dinner to-night there will be more of that 'talk' you seem to fear so greatly than any that has gone before. I should advise you at all inconvenience to show yourself to-night. In this one matter at least," said he bitterly, "permit me to judge for you."

She sighed submissively, and moved towards the door. She owed him obedience in this, she thought, if only on account of the way in which he had condoned her offence, that, however really innocent, had nevertheless caused him a good deal of annoyance. When she got to the door, however, she paused and looked back at him.

"Do you think," she asked shyly, "that they will speak of it? Will ask me to explain, I mean?"

"I have no doubt," calmly, "that your friend Mr. Savage having got you into this scrape will now do his best to get you out of it again. Probably he is doing the 'ex-

plaining' at this moment. You had better leave it all to him."

"But if anything *should* be said; and she—" stammering—"Mrs. Scarlett—she——"

"*No one* shall make you unhappy about it, if that is what you mean," said he shortly. He frowned, yet in spite of the anger he was feeling a great pity for her arose in his heart. She looked so pale, so childish, standing there with that forlorn frightened look on her lovely face. He remembered how she had seemed to him on that night at Lady Blaine's ball, a tall, slender, haughty creature, who moved and looked as though the world was at her feet, that night when he had not known her. But now it was all different, she stood there nervous, helpless. She seemed to have grown very young again through her fear, almost like the Marvel of long ago! *How* long ago it seemed now!

She was still trifling uncertainly with the handle of the door, as if eager to be gone, yet more eager still to say something before going, that required a little courage in the utterance.

"Would you very much mind," she said at last, "being near, close to the drawing-room door, when I come down? I could pretend to say something to you when I entered—it would take away some of the awkwardness."

"Not in the least. And I don't see why you need pretend either. You can"—with a faint sneer—"make up a nice little speech for the occasion, something conjugal, loving, to deliver as your eyes meet mine."

"Well, so I could," said she, sighing disconsolately. The sneer had passed her by.

"Though I think you have hit on rather a bad plan. My presence is so plainly distasteful to you, and has so much the unfortunate effect of increasing your natural nervousness, that I would suggest your stationing somebody else beside the door, Savage for example. You are evidently quite at home with him."

"Does that mean that you will not help me?" asked she, turning very pale.

"On the contrary, that I wish to help you."

"Do you know that you are very cruel, very unjust," said she with quivering lips. "And," in a low tone, "what I did not believe you—ungenerous."

"Ungenerous?" repeated he, as if stung.

"Yes, I am a little perplexed just now—a little at your mercy, and you make me feel it."

"Look here," said he impulsively, making a step towards her, until he saw that she shrank backwards, when he stopped; "don't you think you have had enough of this sort of thing? You can't go on playing with fire for ever without being scorched. To-night has awakened you to that fact. Will you give it up and come away with me to the North, to Ringwood, anywhere? I shan't be much in your way—I'll promise to keep out of it as far as I can. I would indeed do a good deal to put an end to this state of affairs."

"To go—to that lonely place—alone with you. Oh no! Do not ask it," entreated she, in a low but vehement tone. "Knowing all I do, it would be insupportable to me. You too, you would not be able to endure it. If—if there was love it would be different. But do not insist upon this, Fulke, I implore you. If you do," with a miserable glance at him, "I shall break my heart."

"Well, don't do it just now at all events," said he roughly, and with a touch of open scorn. "There isn't any time for an exhibition of that sort. If you mean to change your gown for dinner, I'd advise you to do it at once." He turned upon his heels and left her.

Marvel ran up the stairs quickly, fearful of being stopped and questioned. She had never in all her young life felt so utterly alone as at this moment. She longed, yet feared, to see Cicely, knowing she would scold her, and indeed there was no one upon whom she could depend to sympathize with her and condole without the hateful preliminary lecture.

Oh, if he had but loved her! If she could only have thrown herself fearlessly upon his breast and told him all, with tears and caresses! Tears? Why there would have been no tears had that been so, only a laughing explanation of a ridiculous dilemma. So strongly do circumstances

colour cases, that what would have been a matter for jesting with one, was now for her a subject bordering upon the infringement of the decencies of society.

She sat in her room, cold and disconsolate, shrinking from the thought that presently she should have to summon her maid, although now barely a quarter-of-an-hour remained for her in which to change her gown. Again and again there returned to her that longing to fling herself into his embrace, to feel his dear arms round her, to be sure of a welcome there. If she was sure of that she would care for nothing. No one would have the power to frighten her. But this sad feeling of utter loneliness! His last scornful words, his last look remained with her, and chilled her to her very soul. And with it was the miserable knowledge that she had to go downstairs presently and face them all. Cicely would greet her with a vivid reproach in her dark eyes. Lady Lucy would probably show her displeasure by a marked coldness. And there would be no one to help her. By Fulke's last words she felt certain he would not be at the door to help her to get over the almost childish nervousness she was sure to betray.

She rose with a little start and rang her bell, and Burton came hurrying in. Burton was a comfort, certainly. She loved her honestly, neither for wage nor for favour, but because she had served her ever since she was a little girl and openly believed her to be the sweetest thing on earth. However it was, she was the apple of Burton's eye, who was herself an unspoilable old maid and very apt to regard with that greenish orb all other people with a stern disfavour.

"Law, my lady, you'll be late," she said now, bustling about amongst Marvel's many gowns. "Ten minutes! and not even your walking gown off. Which dress shall I lay out, my lady?"

"The prettiest, Burton, the most becoming," said Marvel, with sudden energy, beginning to pull off the damp gown she still wore. It occurred to her that when going to execution it is a point of etiquette to don one's Sunday clothes; and besides, thought the poor child, feverishly, as he is angry it may make him a little *less* angry if I look my best. So a white gown was chosen and a few priceless pearls were

twisted in her hair and round her soft firm lovely throat, and with a brilliant gleam, born of excitement, in her large eyes, and a face as pale as a snowdrop, she went downstairs to encounter the sneers and smothered smiles that she felt were awaiting her. Oh! if she could only manage to keep out of Mrs. Scarlett's way—for after all it was of her she was really afraid.

She was wrong, however, in her belief that Wriothesley would not come to her assistance. He stood exactly inside the door as she entered it, and as she glanced at him and paused in her surprise and agitation, he went up to her and pushed aside a chair that stood a little in her way.

"After all, you forgot to make up that speech," he said, with a half-amused smile. She smiled back at him with the tears in her eyes. She was at that moment passionately grateful to him. But there was not any time to say anything, because just then Lady Lucy laid her hand upon her arm, and Marvel, looking up apprehensively, saw that she was smiling.

"You're a happy young woman," she said, with her usual carelessness of effect, but with a friendly glance. "Half the world spend a lifetime in trying to get themselves talked about, and you accomplish it in a few hours. Well—a nice fright you gave me. I was about to have the duck pond dragged for your liveless corse when Fulke brought you home. How pale you look, child; I hope you have not caught cold. Nigel has been giving us a thrilling account of your incarceration, and I'm sure you must both have been frozen in that wretched old tower. Henry" (Lord Verulam) "is so annoyed about it. He is going to have that treacherous lock taken off to-morrow."

At this Marvel plucked up courage and began to find out that she had been exaggerating her own offence, and that no one regarded it half so seriously as she did. Even Cicely, who always disapproved of her friendship for Nigel, only told her she was "incorrigible," with a little loving laugh, when she found herself near.

"Are you sure you felt no chill? What a miserable plight to be in," she said.

There had been a good deal of talk about it over the tea

cups a while ago, and later when the truth was discovered. Savage, who had sauntered in amongst them with an unconcerned air, had told his tale in an unvarnished fashion, and many had been the comments thereon. Mrs. Dameron had been flippantly slanderous about it, Mr. Kitts a trifle amusing, though in a good-natured way. To Dameron it had been merely a situation that might be worked up into a chapter in the novel that was soon to electrify the world. Mrs. Scarlett had been eloquently silent, and Mrs. Geraint had grown suddenly intense, and had wondered in an emotional manner how the stars had looked as seen through those æsthetic openings in those grand old mediæval walls, whilst the storm rode high and the heavens were afire with electric light!

Dinner passed over without the slightest allusion to the event of the afternoon, and afterwards there was a good deal of music and some chess and baccarat, and Marvel, who had recovered herself and was feeling happier than usual in spite of all that had happened, began to think she had heard the last of what had been to her so sore an experience.

She had been talking to Mr. Kitts, and had just turned aside from him, meaning to cross the room to where Cicely stood with Sir George as usual leaning over her chair, when a soft languid voice smote on her ears.

"So glad you have not suffered in any way through your little adventure of this evening," said Mrs. Scarlett, smiling at her with the slow insolent smile that Marvel so well knew, and so much dreaded. There was meaning in the smooth tones. "We missed you," she went on, and then paused, "for *hours*, I think. *Were* you locked up in that romantic old place with Mr. Savage for hours?"

"It seemed an eternity," replied Marvel, as calmly as she could, though her heart began to beat with unpleasant force. Why did this woman hate her so? Some instinct taught her that the answer to that question lay hidden deeper down than could be found in that popular one of jealousy.

"So long? and in such congenial society?" with the same cruel flickering smile. Marvel looked round for escape, but could see none; and she had sufficient pride to decline to run from her foe. She turned her large earnest eyes

upon her with a glance full of melancholy entreaty, but she said nothing. There was always something about this woman, who never spared her taunt or gibe, that attracted and fascinated her as much as it repulsed her. "It was your husband who unearthed you, was it not? Well, and how did he take it? Did he care?"

"Was there any reason why he should?" with a suspicion of hauteur. "He regretted the inconvenience to which I had been put, but further than that Lord Wriothesley did not, as you call it, 'care.'"

"No? How amiable of him!" She leant back a little and looked straight at Marvel over the top of her huge feather fan. "That," she said deliberately, "is the comfort of having a husband who is entirely indifferent."

Lady Wriothesley grew pale to her very lips, and her clear eyes shone.

"There are moments when you forget yourself," she said, very gently, but with unspeakable dignity. Mrs. Scarlett stared at her coolly for full a minute, and then smiled in her swift languid way.

"Never! There you wrong me," she said, with perfect unconcern; "I never forget anything—myself least of all. Don't get incorrect notions about me into your head. And please don't stand there, dear Lady Wriothesley, looking as though you were quite eager for a pretext to leave me. Spare me a minute or two to amuse me with your little *fiasco* of this afternoon."

Marvel rejected her offer of a seat on the lounge beside her by a gracefully disdainful gesture of the hand, and was thinking eagerly of some last word to say before leaving, when Wriothesley came quickly up to where she stood and laid his hand carelessly, but with all the appearance of good fellowship, upon her shoulder.

"You have been waiting for me, perhaps," he said, looking earnestly into her eyes, "but I assure you I could not come sooner." She understood him, and flashed back at him an answering glance full of warmest gratitude. She did not shrink from him, there was no access of nervousness in her manner because of his presence at *this* moment, at all events, as he noticed with a little throb of relief.

"And what have you two been talking about?" he went on pleasantly, glancing keenly from Mrs. Scarlett's impenetrable face, which yet was alight with mocking fire, to Marvel's, which was extremely pale. That one glance enabled him to take in the situation.

"I was just entreating Lady Wriothesley to sit by me for a little, and give me an account of her adventure," said Mrs. Scarlett suavely.

"What! a *second* edition! Surely you must be hard up for conversation," said he laughing. "Why just before dinner I saw you listening attentively to Savage's description of it, which really was well worth the hearing. He should be congratulated on his style—so terse, so graphic. I assure you anything Lady Wriothesley could say would be tame in comparison. You will forgive me that detestable speech?" with a courteous smile at his wife.

"Anything!" replied Marvel gratefully; and with a slight salutation to Mrs. Scarlett, she crossed the room to where Cicely sat.

Lord Wriothesley found a chair and seated himself beside Mrs. Scarlett, with all the bearing of one who meant to stay where he was for quite an indefinite period. Mrs. Scarlett drew her skirts a little to one side to admit of his coming closer, and leant towards him with her most fascinating smile.

CHAPTER XLIII.

"Let this be said between us here,
One love grows green when one turns grey;
This year knows nothing of last year;
To-morrow has no more to say
To yesterday."

"After all, Nigel Savage is not so clever as I believed him," she said, with a faint updrawing of her pencilled brows and a little shrug. "That sudden devotion to Mrs. Dameron, that open avoidance of the other, is very poor indeed."

"Is it? I haven't studied it," said Wriothesley with a

rather amused smile. "Savage, however, appears to me to be rather poor all through. At the same time I wouldn't if I were you try to make a romance out of a ludicrous incident. There doesn't seem to me to be the material for it."

"No? It is charming to see you so free from that vulgar vice called jealousy," said she, with a lingering glance at him; "though one *does* hear that there can be no true love without it. You are changed, my friend; there was a time when you would not have looked with such lenient eyes upon a rival."

"What a dark saying! Must I unravel it?" said Wriothesley gaily. "I am not good at guessing, and I confess that bit about the *rival* throws me out altogether. Where does he come in? For the rest, were you alluding to those old days when I was so desperately in love with you? Jolly old days they were, weren't they?"

She was quite equal to the task of hiding from him the bitter chagrin she was feeling, but he intercepted and caught the one swift dart of vindictive anger that flashed from her eyes to his, and that she was unable to control.

"By-the-by," he went on presently, "I have often wondered why you never married."

"It is kind of you to have wasted so many thoughts on me. *I* have wondered at that too, perhaps," with a rather bitter little laugh. "I was so very nearly a duchess that I did not care to accept a lesser part—to 'decline on a range of lower feelings.'"

"I daresay there is a good deal in that," said he carelessly; "and after all, too, marriage is not always the happiest of estates."

"True," said she grimly; and then: "You speak from experience?"

"Well, no," with a rather amused air. "I am so very little married you see that my experience would go for naught. You are different; and in those old days we were just now discussing you used to tell me that——"

"I think perhaps it would be more graceful of you," she said, "to forget all that happy past." Her tone was peculiar.

"Why should one forget what was so happy?" replied he with the utmost cheerfulness. "No; I like to remember it. It was pleasant whilst it lasted, and it taught me many things."

"Even how to tolerate the foolish flirtations of a frivolous child!" exclaimed she in a low tone, with an undisguised sneer. He laughed, although a sullen dark red mounted to his brow.

"That is unworthy of you!" he said. "You are too lovely a woman to descend to such speeches as that."

"Never mind me," said she with a frown. "We were talking a while since of Lady Wriothesley."

"So we were. She is so charming a study that I do not wonder at your returning to it."

"You are not the only one who finds her charming."

"Naturally. To look at her is to admire her."

"If she is so precious in your sight"—with a curl of her lips—"I wonder you do not guard her more carefully."

"Am I remiss in my duty? Just think how I ran through all the storm and wind this evening to her rescue."

"To get small thanks for your pains, I expect."

"I got very pretty thanks, on the contrary. I don't believe," airily, "she was ever so glad to see me in her life before."

"She is not so stupid then as her—as Mr. Savage. She, it appears, *can* act her part," said she with a cold disdain.

"A word," said Wriothesley, leaning towards her, with an ominous light in his eyes that startled her. "You have given me a good deal of advice up to this; take a little from me now. Do not go *too far!*"

"One cannot in friendship's cause," replied she coolly. "Why should I not speak—I, who see most of the game. I warn you, in spite of that last warning of yours, that unless you change your tactics you will lose this paragon of yours." Her calm audacity restored him to his former careful indifference, more than all the apologies in the world could have done.

"I do not think so," he said with a smile. "She is mine, and I shall keep her."

"If you *can!*"

"Another sibylline speech! You know I told you you were in a rather exalted mood to-night. By-the-by, it is rather a bad compliment, isn't it, to tell me I cannot hold my own as well as another."

"No man can fight against too heavy odds." She raised her head and looked him fair in the face. "Put a stop to your wife's intimacy with Nigel Savage," she said. There was something diabolical in the measured way in which she dealt this open thrust. Wriothesley regarded her curiously for a second, and then, taking up her fan which lay on her knee, tapped the back of her hand lightly with it.

"Oh, no; I shan't do *that*," he said, in the friendliest manner possible. "I have the most perfect confidence in Lady Wriothesley's taste, and I should not dream of interfering with any of her friendships."

"Ah! Is that your *rôle?*" said she, looking at him through insolent, half-closed lids. "Have you ever thought that people may misconstrue your motives?"

"That is of little moment to me so long as they are not misconstrued by her."

"It is amazing, this wonderful affection that has sprung up in your breast for this girl, this wife, who only a month ago was so great a stranger that you did not even know her. Am I to understand that you are wisely going to make a virtue of necessity, and pretend to be in love with her?"

"I will tell you a secret," said Wriothesley gaily, lowering his tone to one of a mysterious softness. "I have only just discovered it myself, so you are the very first to hear it. It is all about Lady Wriothesley, and it means that I *—adore her!*"

CHAPTER XLIV.

"A strange perplexity
Creeps coldly on me like a fear to die.
Courage uncertain dangers may abate;
But who can bear th' approach of certain fate?"

It was an intense relief to Marvel when the evening came to an end, and she was able to retire to the solitude of her

own room. She dismissed the faithful Burton almost immediately, under the plea of being especially fatigued; and then she took her head into her hands and began to think. The fire was blazing cheerfully, and Burton, before being driven forth, had put her into a pretty loose robe of white cashmere and swansdown, so that she was quite free to do her meditations as comfortably as possible.

There was a sense of satisfaction that was almost luxurious in the thought that she was at last alone, that she could think matters out to their end without having to make civil answers to dull remarks in the very middle of a tormenting query made to her own heart. She felt a lassitude both of mind and body, born of the afternoon's misadventure, and all the nervous doubts and fears consequent on it. One thing, however, sent a little refreshing thrill through her—it was the certainty that Fulke had taken her part *against* Mrs. Scarlett!

Yes, there could be no doubt about that. With what a smile he came up to her then, when she was feeling depressed, unstrung by that woman's cruel insolence! He had made a little pretence of being bound to come to her through an arrangement made on some former occasion, and there was something *anxious* in the expression of his eyes that showed her how he dreaded the thought that he was late in saving her from annoyance. Mrs. Scarlett, of course, had not understood all that. Marvel threw up her head, and the soft warm blood dyed her cheek, and a pretty triumphant smile parted her lips as she told herself there had been quite a secret understanding between her and Fulke to-night, into which Mrs. Scarlett had not entered.

Perhaps his old love for her was dead! Oh! if that might be! Its death would not, of course, bring any nearer the birth of a love for her, and yet there was comfort in the thought of it; not only comfort, but absolute relief. Involuntarily she lifted her hand to press it against her bosom, as if in repression of a sudden sigh, and there her fingers came in contact with something.

Only an old locket, worn, damaged. Yet the sight of it drove the smile from her face, the light from her eyes. No, she was mad to dream of comfort anywhere; there was none!

She rose and went over to where the lamps stood on her dressing-table, and looked at the locket; at this one frail thing that connected her with an unknown past. Slowly she opened it and gazed at the face within; so like yet so unlike her own. She glanced from it to the mirror, where her own face looked out at her cold and sorrowful, and caught the resemblance. There was something, however, about the hair in the picture that struck her as peculiar. It was brushed very closely back at either side so that the shaven cheeks looked thin and gaunt. How would she look if she brushed her hair like that? Would the resemblance be more striking than it now was, between her and this pale, cynical looking man, whom she hardly dared to call—father.

She pulled the hairpins out of the carefully brushed hair that Burton had but just now coiled so smoothly round her shapely head, and rolled it up again into a loose, soft, high knot, that would admit of the severe brushing back of the soft tresses into a severely Greek fashion, so as to accentuate the likeness to the picture that she already saw.

When she had so brushed it, she found the effect was startling. She was so like that faded face lying in her hand that she could not longer doubt the relationship in which he stood to her. She stood looking down upon it, wondering vaguely, in an awe-stricken way, about many things, when the sudden opening of her door roused her to more active thought.

She turned abruptly, standing now with her back to the lamps, as Mrs. Scarlett advanced across the threshold. She hardly knew her, the cold supercilious beauty of an hour ago. She looked now so wild and haggard. Her lips were blue, her hand was pressed convulsively to her side.

"Have you any chloral?" she asked in a fierce impatient tone, that bespoke a very agony of pain. "My maid belongs to this part of the world, and I gave her leave to go home to-night, and she has forgotten to put out the bottle, or mislaid it, or something. Have you any?"

"No—but——" began Marvel, who was a little frightened, not only at her sudden entrance, but by the ghastliness of her appearance.

"Do you mean that you can get some?" feverishly. "If so, do, and at once."

"I think, perhaps, if I went to Mrs. Verulam she might get it from the housekeeper," said Marvel. She came forward as she spoke in a quick eager way until she stood beneath the full glare of a bracket lamp. So standing, Mrs. Scarlett raised her eyes and saw her.

An extraordinary change swept over her face. An awful fear, mingled with a curious disbelief, distorted her features. She staggered away from Marvel with a sharp cry, and leant against the wall behind her, panting, shuddering.

"Who are you, girl? *Speak!*" she cried hoarsely. "Great Heaven! what horrible thing is this! The dead! the dead! where are they!" She grew suddenly convulsed and reeled backwards, clutching wildly at the empty air. Marvel sprang forward and caught her just as she fell.

She supported her tenderly, and being tall, and, though slender, strong, she lifted her in her arms, and half drew, half carried her to a low lounge at the other side of the fireplace.

The doing of all this, however, created a rather unusual disturbance, and following as it did on that short but piercing cry that came from Mrs. Scarlett, had reached Wriothesley's ears, whose room adjoined Marvel's. He was just in the act of knocking to demand the meaning of it, when Marvel herself unlocked the door between them and entered his room. She found him in his shirt and trousers with the end of a cigarette between his lips, but she hardly took any notice of that, she was so glad to find him awake and able to be of service to her.

"Oh! come in," she said. She was looking very much upset, and indeed, the sight of that rigid form and ghastly face within, stretched in a seemingly lifeless state upon the lounge, had unnerved her to a very unusual degree. Coming upon all that had gone before it, it was the veritable last straw, and threatened to break, if not her back, at least her courage. It was an unspeakable relief to find that she was not to be left alone with this new burden.

"Come quickly," she said, holding out her hand to Wriothesley, and flinging his cigarette into the fire, he followed her into her own room.

"What is it?" he asked, and then he saw the prostrate insensible figure upon the couch, and went quickly up to it.

"She is not *dead!*" he exclaimed with great anxiety, an anxiety that seemed exaggerated to his wife, who could not help watching him closely.

"Not that, I hope," she said. She had got some cologne water, and was busily bathing Mrs. Scarlett's forehead, whilst Wriothesley in a rather helpless fashion was chafing her hands.

"If one had a little brandy," he said, brightening as this idea occurred to him, and dropping the inanimate hands he rushed off to his own room.

"Oh! don't be long," entreated Marvel as he passed by her. He returned almost immediately, and between them they forced a little of the spirit within Mrs. Scarlett's pallid lips. It seemed to revive her, and presently she opened her eyes and gazed without intelligence around her. She sighed faintly; memory seemed to come back to her in a flash, and as it did so her glance fell on Wriothesley, who was bending solicitously over her.

"You!" she said.

"I hope you are feeling better now," said he kindly. But she was still somewhat dazed by her late attack, and did not seem to hear him.

"You!" she said again, in a low, anxious tone, and with a smile that Marvel had never seen upon her lips before; and yet, soft though it was, and suggestive of unlimited tenderness, there was more of gratified vanity, of exulting triumph in it than honest affection. She raised her hand feebly and held it out to him. He grew extremely red, but of course he had to take it.

"Lady Wriothesley is here, and is very anxious about you," he said as collectedly as he could, though he knew the very fact of his warning her of Marvel's presence would be rather damnatory in the latter's eyes.

Marvel came quickly forward, a rather indignant light in her eyes; she came close up to where Mrs. Scarlett lay, so that she could distinctly see her.

"I am glad you are better," she said coldly. "Do you think you will still require the chloral, or——"

Mrs. Scarlett started violently when first she spoke, and then grew suddenly quiescent after one long glance at her.

"I had forgotten about it," she murmured feebly.

She made an effort to rise, but Marvel entreated her to remain still.

"Your maid is away; you are still very weak," she said; "I beg you will make this room your own for the night."

"Oh no, thank you," said Mrs. Scarlett, now rising with determination to a sitting posture. "I have already given you far too much trouble—I," she laughed faintly, "I don't know what happened to me; but I felt curiously unstrung all the evening, and I suppose the climax came as I entered your room."

She had studiously avoided looking at Marvel ever since that first glance; and now, as she rose very slowly, and with evident difficulty, to her feet, and as Marvel put out her hand to help her, she shrank from her touch with a visible shudder.

"Good-night. I thank you very much," she said, with a striving after graciousness that proved a failure. She took no notice of Wriothesley, who was deeply grateful for the rudeness, and moved towards the door in a dull, heavy fashion.

"I really think you are not well enough to remain by yourself," said Marvel hastily, deep compassion awaking in her gentle breast. "As your maid is absent, will you permit me to sit with you, at all events until you are asleep?"

"You quite crush me with kindness," said Mrs. Scarlett, with a rather bitter intonation; "but, no."

"Then may I wake one of the servants, and send her to——"

"I require no one, thank you," curtly. "Good-night. Pray do not make yourself so very unhappy about me."

She took the candlestick that Marvel put into her hand, still without looking at her, and then went out of the room and up the corridor to her own apartment.

Marvel stood looking after her, oppressed always by a vague sense of uneasiness, until she saw her cross her own threshold, when, with a little sigh, she turned inwards

again and closed her door. Wriothesley, still without his coat or waistcoat, stood on the hearthrug, his hands clasped behind his back, as is the manner of men when they feel a fire even from afar.

CHAPTER XLV.

"We two stood there with never a third,
But each by each, as each knew well."

"WELL!" said he, "I call that about the coolest thing that ever I saw! Next time she is going to have one of her fits or her faints, or whatever it was, I hope she will choose somebody else's room for her stage."

Marvel said nothing; she felt a little angry. She could not forget the assured way Mrs. Scarlett held out her hand to him; and that subtle smile also lingered in her memory. It was all very fine for him to appear disgusted with her now, but there *had* been a time when——. Yet in her soul she was glad, because of the slighting tone he used. He was watching her attentively, and as she seated herself upon an ottoman, he noticed the languor that seemed to fill all her limbs.

"She has frightened you," he said.

"It was a little shock. And I am afraid she is really very ill, she looked so pale."

"Not paler than you are. Why on earth aren't you in bed at this hour of the night? Do you know what o'clock it is?"

"No."

"Half-past two—a most ridiculous hour for you to be up!"

"I might say that to you," said she with a faint smile.

"Eh? Oh! *I* was smoking, and—er—reading. But you?"

She made him no answer, but sat silent, twirling her wedding ring round and round her finger.

"What a fire you have, too! Enough to freeze one to look at it."

He settled it up for her as well as he could, and, after a considerable amount of noise and dust, made it rather presentable. She sat quite quiet all the time, and was indeed so white and still that he grew uneasy.

"You are looking awfully ill," he said at last, going over to her and laying his hand upon her shoulder. "What is the matter with you?"

"Nothing," she said with a heavy sigh.

She got up as if to escape from his hand, and moved languidly to the toilet table, where she stood pushing idly to and fro the bottles and caskets and pots with which it was littered. She looked so unlike herself that he was really anxious about her, and followed her to the table, determined to accept no repulse.

"Tell me what you were doing during all these long, lonely hours," he said.

"Thinking," replied she briefly.

"Thinking!" He repeated her words with rather undue force. A dark red mounted to his brow. "Of Savage?" he asked involuntarily. He was horrified when the question passed his lips; but it was too late then to look for anything but the way in which she should receive it. That was with the utmost indifference. Evidently she had not understood the real meaning of it.

"Oh no," she said.

"Of what, then?" persisted he.

"Of the past—the old dead days. Of Lady Mary, and of——"

She had averted her face, and now her eyes fell upon the locket she had dropped upon the table, and with a little quick sighing breath she laid her hand upon it, as if to conceal it, and closed her trembling fingers round it. It was her badge of shame—her disgrace—the thing that perpetually reminded her that she was a Pariah, a thing apart from the world, in which for a season she moved. But the little white hand had been too slow to do its work. Wriothesley, too, had seen that old trinket and had remembered it. A pang shot through his heart. With all her other griefs and regrets, had she to battle too with this?

"My dear girl," he said very gently, "why permit yourself such morbid meditations? Why think of what cannot now be helped, and of what is really of so little consequence?"

"I think of it always," she said. "I *never* forget it—how can I?"

"Why cannot you? you mean. Here you are respected, loved by many, and the very centre of attraction, as it were, by right of your grace and beauty, and yet you would still pull caps with fortune."

"You will tell me next, as Cicely does, that the very mystery that surrounds me adds to that attraction. But oh! to solve that mystery, even at the cost of the attraction. You cannot understand what it is to feel like me. I am different from all those with whom I move. They have parents, homes; they know at least from where they sprung; but as for me," she drew her breath sharply and looked at him with miserable, lovely eyes. "Oh, the cruel pain of it!" she said.

"You yourself create that pain," he was beginning warmly; but she stopped him.

"Do I?" she said sadly. "You are kind, but there is no real truth in what you say, and you know it. Would any man willingly choose me for his wife, do you think? No—hear me," checking the interruption he would have made. "Would you, do you think, have ever married me had I not in my mad childish ignorance asked you to do so, and had not you in a moment of pique, a moment when you were broken-hearted, and felt the world no longer contained any good for you—consented. Fulke," laying a burning hand upon his, "whatever else is between us, let there at least be honesty. Do not seek to contradict what I have said."

There was indeed so much that was true in what she had said, that he could not answer her reassuringly as he would fain have done. He stood therefore silent before her, for which she honoured him the more. Yet her head drooped during that sad silence, and the mournful lines about her mouth grew more pronounced.

"I am an outcast," she said.

"Don't talk like that," said he angrily. "There is neither sense nor meaning in it. And as to what you say about no man caring to marry you, are you prepared to say that amongst all those men you now know, there is not one who would willingly call you wife?" He regarded her with a keen scrutiny as he asked this.

"Not one," replied she slowly.

Did she mean it, or was she playing with perfect *aplomb*, a very difficult part? His eyes were still fixed upon the pale beautiful face, with its downcast eyes, and he was obliged to admit to himself that a brow so pure could hide behind it no smallest deceit.

"You are wrong," he said gently. "Although you so distrust me, and although our marriage had little of romance about it, I still am pleased with the thought that *I* can call you wife."

She smiled in a rather abstracted fashion.

"You were always kind," she said. And then, with a singular abruptness that quite disarranged the speech he was about to make, "It is late. Good-night."

"Good-night," said he in turn, startled into that commonplace response. "As you say, it is time we thought of our beauty sleep." He looked down as he spoke, and by chance saw that her hand was still clasped nervously round that unlucky locket. He went closer to her, took the hand and with gentle force opened it.

"We have had enough of this for one night at least," he said. "Better give it into my keeping for the future." As he spoke he tried to possess himself of the locket, but with a sudden vehemence she clung to it.

"Do not take it! I promised her—auntie—that I would never part with it. Oh! Fulke, do not deprive me of it." There was so much fear in the glance she raised to his, that of course he resigned all idea of taking possession of the locket.

"As you will," he said. "But at least promise me that you will sit up no longer. These small, dark, uncanny hours are not meant for children like you. Come, promise me before I go, that you will be a good little girl and say your prayers and go to sleep at once."

He laughed as he said this, and taking up the locket dropped it into her dressing-case.

"There let it lie," he said tragically. And then, "Well, have I that promise?"

"You have," said she smiling. "Good-night, then."

"Good-night." He had moved away from her towards his own door, when some sudden impulse swayed her. She went quickly up to him, and laying her hand upon his breast lifted her cheek to his, as a child or a young girl might do, asking a caress. Wriothesley taken so unawares flushed crimson. He placed his hand beneath her chin and turning her face more towards him, kissed her with exceeding gentleness upon the lips.

"Good-night," he said again.

CHAPTER XLVI.

"Escape me?
Never—
Beloved!
While I am I and you are you,
So long as the world contains us both—
Me the loving and you the loth,
While the one eludes, must the other pursue."

THE pleasant informal dance was almost at an end: the word "Carriages" had been mentioned once or twice, the young people pretending not to hear it. Early in the evening the Christmas tree had been lit in the great hall, and round it quite a hundred and fifty children of all sizes and ages and stations, from the cotter's son to the little lordling, had stood in speechless delight. It was allowed on all sides, indeed, to have been a gigantic success, and happy were the little children of all ranks who went home that night literally covered with toys and bonbons, satiated with excitement, and with every prospect of being extremely unwell in the morning.

It ought by right to have been called a New Year's tree, as it was kept back until the second week in January to

accommodate the vicar, who was absent unavoidably, and who would have broken his heart, according to Lady Lucy, if he had not been able to see the delight on his children's faces when the unaccustomed dainties were placed in their little arms. Poor children, coming out of their cabins and hovels and unlovely homes to gain this sweet glimpse of paradise.

After the tree, and the dispersion of the humbler guests, dancing had been got up amongst the house party and those invited from the country round to witness the annual bestowing of pretty gifts upon the peasantry connected with the estate, and those poorer ones who lived on the confines of it. It was a farewell dance, said Lady Lucy regretfully to Marvel, who had really done wonders with the children all the evening, and had developed a perfect talent for understanding exactly what toy would best suit each child.

"A *horrid* farewell dance!" said Lady Lucy. "I really wish you would change your mind at the eleventh hour and put off going to-morrow. Cicely can't want you much, until her own party is in full swing."

But Cicely coming up at the moment and hearing this was exceeding wroth, and declared she had Marvel's word to come south with her to her own home and that she would not let her off it for any sister-in-law in the world.

The dancing was kept up very briskly, and was all the more enjoyed in that the dance itself was a rather impromptu affair. Nigel Savage, as every one remarked, was in specially high spirits, and made himself absolutely charming to even the old and ugly ones, who, as a rule, sat in swooning attitudes along the walls, in tall straight rows as unbroken as a line of holly hocks. But those high spirits of his bordered closely on despair. It was the last evening he would spend with her. He might see her again, indeed, his home was situated but a short distance from Mrs. Verulam's, but he knew intuitively that Cicely would not make him welcome at Grangemore, and even if she did, he felt that once broken the threads of this one short perfect month could never be united again.

The very thought of this made him reckless. He asked

Marvel to dance with him far oftener than he usually permitted himself to do, and she did not refuse him. She was looking more than ordinarily lovely, because she was looking happy; she had found a very deep gladness in the joy of those little children, and a solace in the clinging of their eager arms. She was *the* one indeed amongst all the grand ladies whom they had singled out as their best friend, and the one of whom they were least afraid.

She had not yet lost the flush and the smiling lips that their open devotion had given her; she was dressed in white as usual, but she wore no diamonds to-night—only some scented roses that lay upon her breast, and one white rose in her hair. There were roses, too, amongst the folds of her gown, and a bunch of them were attached to her fan —all white.

She was standing now against the mantel-shelf—a tall, sweet, slender thing—

> "A maid so sweet that her mere sight made glad
> Men sorrowing—"

when Savage once more made his way to her to ask her to give him the dance then just beginning. Wriothesley, who saw him coming, and who stood near to Marvel, with a quick frown went up to her, and—

"Will you give me this dance?" said he.

"I will give it," said she with some surprise. "But for married people to dance together——"

"I know. It is an abomination in my sight also; but if you will waltz with me from this down to the door opposite, it is all I shall ask."

"I should be ungenerous, indeed, were I to refuse so slight a request," said she smiling. She placed her hand on his arm almost as Savage came up to her.

"You are engaged?" said he, his tone an astonished question.

"Yes! Did you, too, wish to dance this with me? The next, if you will then," returned she sweetly.

Wriothesley coughed sharply in a little way he had when annoyed, but he said nothing, and presently his arm was

round her waist; and, when they came to the prescribed door, he seemed to forget all about his compact with her, and went on dancing until they came to it the second time.

"You dance exquisitely," he said then. "Will you come into the conservatory and rest awhile?"

"No, thank you," said she, with a certain hasty determination.

"It seems strange, does it not," he went on, presently, "that though I have known you all my life, and though we have been married—*how* long?"

"You know. A year and a half," replied she coldly.

"That still this is the first time we have ever danced together."

"Is it so strange? Science has made wonderful strides certainly, but it has not yet arranged for the waltzing of two people together when one is in England and the other in the Rocky Mountains."

"Do you know," said he, looking full at her, "you are the biggest deception I know. A person with your eyes and mouth should not know what it is to be severe."

"I suppose even a person with my lips and eyes can be taught severity by life's cruelties. Yet I hate myself in such a mood as this!" said she with frank regret, turning her beautiful pathetic face to his. "I should not make heartless speeches on a night when I have been so happy. Those little children! did you notice how glad they looked; how their eyes sparkled; how their little hands trembled with delight! Oh! it was *lovely* to see them! Yes, I have been quite happy——" She paused.

"Until now?" gloomily. She turned her eyes on him, as if not understanding, then:

"Oh, no! your thought is wrong. My mind ran upon another subject altogether; I did not think of you," said she simply. "I was only wondering if you would let me give a Christmas tree next year to the little ones on the Ringwood estate."

"*Let* you! Oh! Marvel, have I proved myself so stern a taskmaster that you must grow so red, and grow so nervous, when making a little request like that. Is not all that I have yours?"

"Not all," she said in a low, tremulous tone; and then suddenly she put up her hand as if to prevent his reply. "Not a word," she entreated. "I don't know why I said that—there was no meaning in it. None! I don't *want* anything!" Then, with painful shyness, stammering over each word she uttered in her endeavour to get back into the safe harbour of commonplace converse, "I may then—give the poor—*your* poor—a Christmas tree next year."

"You may do precisely what you like," replied he icily, chilled by her evident shrinking from anything deeper than mere surface friendliness with him. "That stress upon the pronoun was scarcely necessary, I think. Surely they are your poor also; you may repudiate me if you will, but you have to acknowledge *their* claims upon you."

She stood silent, her eyes cast down—distressed, not knowing what to say.

"It seems to me that your charity is boundless to all the world—save me," he went on, with a supercilious smile. "Even to Savage just now you granted grace, seeing how deplorably he regretted the loss of this dance. By-the-by, you have danced a good deal with him to-night. I have never thought of asking the question before, but—is he a very interesting sort of person?"

He spoke as one athirst for knowledge; and Marvel resented his tone, feeling instinctively the falseness of it.

"I have always found him so," she said calmly.

"The truth, the truth, and nothing but the truth." Such words should be framed and glazed, and hung in all men's houses. This rejoinder of Marvel's, coming honestly from her heart, disconcerted Wriothesley (had she only known it) more than all the elaborated answers that she could have invented.

"So it seems." At this moment the person under discussion could be plainly seen by both making his way to them. Wriothesley had barely time to say another word before he would be within hearing, so, his temper not being at its best, he made that word as pungent as he could.

"Don't let him become *too* interesting!" he said, with a rather unpleasant intonation, having given himself barely time to bow and retire as Savage joined her.

Mrs. Verulam, from afar, had watched all this; and, though their conversation was denied her, their countenances were not, and she drew a very correct account of what had passed from the lights and shades of feeling that marked them.

"I wish Marvel had not been educated in so severely simple a school," she said to Sir George, who had followed her to her retreat behind the curtains of a window, without invitation of any sort.

"Why?" said he vaguely, being busy polishing his glasses at the moment.

"Why? How stupid you are! Because, of course, if a little more alive to the general run of things, she would know how *not* to ruffle Wriothesley's feelings at every step."

"Ruffling will do him good," said Sir George.

"That is your opinion. It doesn't follow that it is a correct one."

"Far from it!" said Sir George, spreading abroad his hands in the meekest self-abnegation.

"And yet I don't know—perhaps you are right!" said she thoughtfully, touched perhaps by his humility. "Well, never mind Wriothesley. He is really, in my estimation, hardly worth an argument."

"Who is?"

"Mrs. Dameron, for example," said she in a tone of withering disgust. "Was there ever so lamentable a person? Look at her! What on earth has she done to her hair to-night? Really, with a straw or two thrown in she would be excellent as Ophelia at her maddest! For my part I don't think she looks proper, eh?"

"That's an awful question," said Sir George, staring hard at the despised Mrs. Dameron, who stood quite opposite to him at the other side of the room and who in truth was very marvellously attired.

"Which means that you are afraid to answer it," said Mrs. Verulam with a shrug. "I'm positive there is a latent fear within you that some day you will be hanged, and you are always providing against that unpleasant possibility. You live in a determination not to commit yourself."

"What a thing for you to say!" exclaimed he with deep

reproach. "Why, I do nothing else whenever fortune gives me five minutes alone with you. Even now I followed you here to——"

"Yes—what brought you here?" demanded she briskly. "Who asked you to come and sit here with me?"

"No one; I saw you alone and I came to you. You sent your partner for a shawl, I think, and I knowing where it was, despatched him in an expressly opposite direction. He," mildly, "will be a good while finding it, I think."

Mrs. Verulam was silent, from reasons untold.

"I thought it an excellent opportunity," went on Sir George in his studiously even way, "to ask you once more to——"

"I do hope you are not going to begin that all over again," interrupted she with some indignation.

"I am beginning nothing. I am only going on with it."

"Am I to understand," exclaimed she, wrath growing warm within her at this persistence, "that you intend proposing to me in every corner of every room of every house we may chance to enter, and behind every available curtain," with a glance at her present surroundings, "until happy death steps in to save me from you?"

"You have indeed discovered my fixed determination!"

"After all that happened years ago! After all you promised then! I shall know how to believe you next time."

"So long as there is a next time," imperturbably, "I can be happy about that."

"You hope to torment me into saying 'yes,'" with an angry little laugh; "but you don't know me if you think so. I can endure a great deal. I am quite proof against persecution of that sort. And besides, if the worst comes to the worst, I have a remedy. There is one thing that remains to me."

"And that?"

"I shall marry some other man."

"Impossible!"

"Impossible! But how then?"

"Because I shall always assassinate that man upon his wedding morning!"

Mrs. Verulam for a moment stared sternly at the pattern

in the lace curtain before her and then burst out laughing. She was still indignant, however.

"To think that you, our scientific friend," she said scornfully, "should give place to such folly!"

CHAPTER XLVII.

"To have the power to forgive
Is empire and prerogative,
And 'tis in crowns a nobler gem,
To grant a pardon than condemn."

"MARVEL, don't stand on ceremony with me," began Mrs. Verulam, herself standing on the threshold of Lady Wriothesley's bedroom; "the fact is, I am not sleepy, and I should dearly love a little gossip with you, so if you are not too tired——?"

The pause, eloquent.

"Not too tired, but——"

"I see," making a little chagrined *moue;* "that 'but' is fraught with meaning. If not tired, you would still be alone, to dwell on your latest triumphs."

"You are not such a Solon as you believe yourself, after all. That 'but' of which you complain was the commencement of a much more mundane speech. I was going to make the confession, *pur et simple*, that I am dreadfully hungry!"

"Never say it again," cried Mrs. Verulam gaily; "come, those cormorants of this evening have no doubt left us something still upon the supper-table. Let us go a-foraging."

"Well, I've been thinking," said Marvel glancing downwards at the loose white robe heavily trimmed with *duchesse* lace that she was wearing, and then up again at Mrs. Verulam, radiant in an exquisite *négligée* of pale blue cache mire, "that perhaps we had better wait a bit. They may not all have gone to bed yet, and to meet them like this!"

"Would they faint?" asked Mrs. Verulam, who knew how well she looked in that ethereal blue and would not

have objected to an accidental *rencontre.* She laughed a little. "Better they should faint than that you should die of starvation."

"Better neither. I daresay I shall live on your conversation for another half-hour or so until we hear the click of the smoking-room door and the tramp, tramp, tramp upstairs. Come; now for your gossip." She stirred the fire vigorously, pushed Cicely into a huge armchair, and flung herself on the rug at her feet.

"It is small. It is unworthy of the name. No big scandal ornaments it. It is only a word or two about Mrs. Scarlett, and——"

"Then I won't hear it," exclaimed Marvel sharply, putting up her hands to her ears. "I can't bear to hear her name mentioned. It—it hurts me somehow."

"There, don't be a goose," said Mrs. Verulam, patting her head; "you needn't feel all that now; she can no longer do you any harm, her day is past. Still, I don't wonder at your dislike to her. I should feel it myself; and for that reason I have decided on not asking her to Grangemore next month."

Marvel got upon to her knees and looked anxiously at her.

"Why have you come to that decision?" she said; "you asked her last year, why should you exclude her from your party now? I hope you will not, Cicely. It will look as if—— They will all say it is because of Fulke, and—and I really do not think he is in love with her now."

"Oh, no. One can see that. As I have just been saying, her star is set. We were rather mistaken about that at first. But yet I do not like to ask her, Marvel, when I see how abominably she treats you."

"It does not touch me now. It used to, I confess, but—not now." It seemed to her that it was a very recent "now." "Do not leave her out because of me. She will be an addition to your party; for one thing she is so beautiful and so much the fashion, and I have reason to think she expects and hopes for an invitation from you."

"From me? For Heaven's sake why? I could name you five different houses at this moment, very much more

important than mine, where she would be received with open arms."

"Nevertheless, I know she would accept your invitation before any of the others."

"Still hankering after Wriothesley? I must say, Marvel, you are either the soul of generosity, or else," with a keen glance at her, "you have made the discovery that Wriothesley at a distance is more desirable than Wriothesley near."

"You mean——?" asked Marvel, a little cold, a little puzzled. She drew back from her.

"Nothing," said Cicely with a pang of remorse. "Don't mind me; it is only that when that woman's name is mentioned I always lose my temper."

"Well, don't mind that. Don't mind anything. Do not thwart her in this matter. Do you know," laying her arms on Cicely's knees and looking up at her with lovely solemn eyes, "I do not think it is Fulke she thinks of so much as *—me!*"

"You! What a conceited child!" Mrs. Verulam burst out laughing. "After all I daresay you are right," she said. "The deposed queen must naturally follow, with a feverish hope of a breakdown, the fortunes of the usurper. Well, your majesty shall be obeyed; I shall give her the desired invitation to-morrow."

"Thank you," said Marvel simply. "I am glad you have arranged it so. Cicely," regarding her earnestly, "has it ever occurred to you that she is very ill?"

"Never. She is too insolent for that. Lucy once hinted something of the kind to me, but I don't believe it."

"I do, then. Sometimes in the very middle of her most brilliant moments she seems to shrink into herself, and a curious and almost cruel light grows within her eyes. I know it. I have watched it, and I think it is born of pain. Oh! Cicely, I am sure that she is suffering secretly—silently; that she tries to hide the knowledge of her suffering from the world."

"Well, so be it. It would be a pity to spoil a romance that interests you so deeply. But even if true, I confess I shouldn't cry about it. What are you so solemn about

now, Marvel? I do believe," severely, "you would do that false creature a good turn if you could!"

Marvel pondered a while.

"I would," she said at last bravely; "call me poor-spirited if you will, but I only wish I had the chance of doing it."

"Spirit! You haven't a particle of it," said Mrs. Verulam indignantly.

"Not an atom, I often think. It is strange, is it not, that I should so desire her friendship? I can't explain it even to myself, and yet I know I would do anything to kill this hatred with which I have so evidently inspired her. That curious fascination I felt on first seeing her, you remember? and which I believed to be a mere passing emotion that would die away on acquaintance, has strengthened rather than decreased."

"You are a dreamer of dreams," said Mrs. Verulam, trying hard to be contemptuous and failing. "And yet is it wise to strive so hard against one's natural workings? You would be a saint, but *can* you? Is it possible to 'love mine enemy?' We all know 'The world and life's too big to pass for a dream,' yet you would make yourself a mere puppet in it—the world I mean—to be tossed to and fro at the whim of a worthless worldling, consoling yourself perchance with the thought that it is all for your soul's benefit! Or else, perhaps, is it that you would say:

> 'I do these wild things in sheer despite,
> And play the fooleries you catch me at,
> In pure rage!'

For fooleries they are, darling, if you think it your duty to act the Good Samaritan to Leonie Scarlett."

"I never knew you so severe before. I have told you how I feel towards her, dear Cicely, and whatever motives you may impute to me I cannot alter now. I am no saint, no angel; no hypocrite either!" She spoke the three last words in a very low tone, and tears gathered in her eyes.

"Oh, Marvel! What a word to use! If I have hurt you, how shall I forgive myself?"

Marvel laughed and blinked back the tears.

"You have not hurt me, you could not," she said. "I understand you too well for that. But Mrs. Scarlett, I confess, is a troublesome subject. Let us forget her and take to something else. Sir George, for example. What of him? I duly noted the fact that you lost yourself with him for a considerable time behind the curtains, but I could not discover by mere scrutiny if anything or nothing came of it."

"Something, certainly. An unlimited supply of abuse, as applied by me to him! Oh," with a sigh of angry impatience, "I don't believe there is under heaven so annoying a man."

"I believe at all events that there is no man so well suited to you, or who loves you as well. I believe also that you love him."

"Nobody can prevent you, of course. This is a free country. Believe away as hard as you can."

"Well, now honestly, what do you think yourself?"

"If you put it *so*, I shall feel myself compelled to lie. When any one says to you, 'Now, to tell you the honest truth,' or 'Well, to be honest with you,' grasp at once the fact that a tremendous tarradiddle is about to be poured into your ears."

"Nonsense, Cicely! I don't want to listen to such put-up trash as that. But there is Sir George, and I *do* think," softly pressing Cicely's face in her own direction with her little velvet palm, so that the fire-flames fell upon it, "that sometimes you feel that he—that he is——"

"Not at all. Not a bit of it," interrupted Mrs. Verulam with great *aplomb*. "You give me credit for too much. Some day I shall seem to you a disgraceful defaulter. Yet, with regard to Sir George, I don't mind admitting to *you*, and you only, that he is the main wall of the biggest enigma I know. Do I like him? Do I dislike him? Is he the most uncompromising bore I know, or the most entertaining companion? Do I wish him dead? or would his death be a calamity? To all these questions I perpetually tell myself I have no answer ready. Yet there is one thing;" she drew herself up into a more likely posture, and smiled as if amused at herself. "if at any time I miss him at my

elbow, I confess I feel *deeply wronged!* Now, how account for that? It is the more difficult, because when he is there I invariably feel indignant. Now what would you make out of all that?"

"A conundrum, of course, as you suggested; and one too to which Sir George alone will find the answer. *Give* him the chance!" Her last suggestion was uttered in a sweet voice, and one full of entreaty.

"Has he enlisted you in his service? If so, a most sweet emissary," said Mrs. Verulam, stooping to kiss her brow. "But," gaily, "surely he has chances enough. He is coming to me next month."

"He has stayed with you often before. That means nothing."

"Say you so, fair prophetess? Well, time works wonders, as they tell us. Let us see what *this* month may bring forth!"

"There goes the click of the smoking-room door," cried Marvel suddenly. "Did you hear it? No? You must be deaf then. Now listen."

And slowly, surely, one after one came the measured tramp of men's feet up the staircase. They could hear how Geraint turned off there, and how Dameron went on past their door. How Wriothesley entered the next room and there went fussing about a good deal, and did quite a tremendous business with the poker, so that it might reasonably be supposed that his fire was now aglow. And then suddenly all sound died away and the house was as calm as though death alone instead of eager life reigned in it.

"Come now," said Marvel, who was standing at the open door to make sure that the last footsteps had indeed died away. "Now we may venture."

They stole downstairs on tiptoe and entered the supper-room, gaunt and deserted and lampless, but it was only the work of a moment to transform it once more into a chamber of light. They lit the lamps in fact and drew their chairs up to the table, and in spite of the depredations of the former visitants made themselves out an excellent supper. They were still laughing and chatting over it when the door opened and Nigel Savage came in.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

"I shall go my ways, tread out my measure,
Fill the days of my daily breath
With fugitive things not good to treasure,
Do as the world doth, say as it saith;
But if we had loved each other—O sweet,
Had you felt, lying under the palms of your feet,
The heart of my heart, beating harder with pleasure
To feel you tread it to dust and death."

He looked pale, haggard and altogether as miserable as a man might be. The smile he conjured up, when with a start he awoke to a sense of their presence, was both strained and unhappy.

"Why, I thought you were all in bed," cried Mrs. Verulam, half rising from her chair.

"The rest may be, I am not," returned he lightly. "I am a wakeful soul at all times. Sleep is coy with me and eludes me, many a night and oft. So oft indeed that I sometimes dread to woo her; so to-night, a happy fear, as it has once more brought me into your company." He smiled more naturally as he said this, yet as he concluded what ought to have been the most cheerful portion of the speech, he sighed heavily.

"That most unlovely of all passions, *hunger*, brought us," said Mrs. Verulam gaily; "but what, may I ask, drove you at such an hour to the 'deserted banquet hall?'"

He looked in a degree embarrassed, and hesitated, as one might who was about to arrange an answer that would be far from the truth, when kindly fate, in the shape of Mrs. Verulam's maid, saved him from "ye readie lie" that was now prepared to trip with lightness from his tongue.

"Madam," whispered the maid, "a note from Sir George;" he said it was to be delivered immediately. It is in your room. I——"

"Very good," whispered her mistress sedately, "you can go." But then she went too, leaving Marvel and Nigel Savage alone in the half-lit oak-panelled dining-room.

"Well," said Marvel lazily, looking up at him, "what *did* bring you?" She had come over to the resuscitated fire

and was leaning back in the depths of a huge armchair, eating slowly and with evident pleasure some crystallized fruit she had carried away from the table. Her pretty loose gown clung softly to her figure, and half her rounded arms were bare. She was a little fatigued after the dancing and general exertions of the evening, and this had thrown a suspicion of languor into her beautiful eyes. To Savage she had never before looked so lovely, and a very passion of despair and regret awoke within him. For himself, in that the love of his life was bound to wither and die without hope of fruition, without touch of gladness; for her, because he believed her unbeloved, uncared for, a pearl thrown to one who knew not the value of gems. It seemed to him a cruelty that cried aloud for vengeance and redress, that this priceless thing should be for ever tied to one who saw not her perfections, whilst there was another who would have thought himself only too blessed if permitted to lay his very life at her feet.

There was a very keen sense of the hopelessness of all things as he stood now looking down upon her with the knowledge full upon him that perhaps, indeed in all human probability, it was for the last time. He had known for a good while that he must go, and to-night had decided him. He would leave, and at once. He could no longer trust himself to stay with her and be silent. He had quite determined to guard his secret to the last—to take it away with him so that she might never know, although there was a vehement desire within him to tell her—to let her know the strength of the love with which she had inspired him.

And now—now, as he gazed on her, lo! all his good resolutions faded and died from him, and only his wild sorrow and his craving to speak aloud the love that was consuming him remained.

"Well," said she again, as she finished the last of her sweetmeats and cast a little side glance at the table as if to see if there were any more, "you don't tell me how it was you came in here?"

Her innocent persistence and the lovely playful smile she gave him did away with the last remnant of righteous determination left to him.

"Must I tell you, really?" he asked, in a tone that was slightly unsteady. Something in his manner warned her, and she glanced up quickly.

"Not if you don't wish it," she said, with a *soupçon* of haste in her air.

"I do wish it," said he defiantly. "I came—for this!"

He went over to a chair that was pushed back against the wall, pulled it out, and picked up from the floor behind it a white rose, faded now, but sweet still and exhaling a perfume that seemed to be part of Marvel herself. And so indeed it was, a part she had let fall during a minute or two when she had paused in the supper-room.

"You dropped this," he said; "it was difficult to pick it up when all the rest were looking on, but I threw it there and watched and waited until the house slept, as I believed, to come and rescue it."

He spoke with a certain carefulness even yet, but the fire in his eyes and voice broke through all bonds and betrayed him to her. She rose abruptly to her feet, her face whitening.

"Nigel!" she said. Her voice trembled; it was such a disastrous, such a *terrible* discovery to her, that words failed her; a sense of loss too was with it. His friendship, upon which she had so fondly relied, where was it now? Gone; swallowed up in the fierce torrent of this overwhelming passion.

"You are surprised," he said with a short laugh that was miserable enough to bring tears to her eyes. "I have successfully deceived you all along, have I not? You have trusted in me as the calm, agreeable friend to whom you could turn when troubles assailed you. You were almost sorry for me when paltry gossip—as shortsighted as it was contemptible—insisted that my mild friendship was but another name for love, but now—you *know!*"

He spoke with an open defiance, as though glorying in her blindness; his black eyes gleamed and his nostrils were slightly dilated.

"What do you call me now?" he went on, as though passion, long repressed, drove him hither and thither as it willed. "A traitor? One who purposely misled and deceived

you!" He had been speaking with a fierce impetus, but now it failed him suddenly, and his voice sank. "Is this to be the end of it," he said, "that you are to remember me only with scorn and hatred? Oh, Marvel!" He fell at her feet and took a fold of her gown in his hands and pressed his lips to it convulsively.

The girl stood motionless as if turned into stone, shocked, horrified, hardly yet believing! It was a hateful revelation, that left her bare of one good friend upon whom she would have staked much, and she was unable for the moment to realize the anguish that lay crouching at her feet.

"Marvel!" he said again, in a low stifled tone; and still no word of comfort, no hope of pardon, came from her. A long awful minute swept by in absolute silence, and then again he spoke:

"You have judged me, and *condemned!*" he said faintly, still with his face hidden in her gown. "It is just, perhaps, but——" A heavy sigh escaped him, that rose and reached her ears. Suddenly the floods of pity that always lay close to her gentle heart broke loose; she bent down over him and with her slender hands tried to raise him to his feet.

"Oh! no, no!" she whispered brokenly. "Oh, Nigel! it is a miserable thing, but perhaps you could not help it."

The simplicity of this little speech went to his very soul. No, he could not have helped it.

"Darling, beloved!" he said with a wild sob or two, and caught the tender healing hands and pressed them to his lips.

"You must not speak like that," she said anxiously, bending over him and releasing, after a moment, one of her hands from his, the other he clung to with a desperate longing. "You forget. Do not kneel there, dear Nigel, but get up and listen to me."

He rose, obedient to her word, and stood before her, with his head down-bent, as if ashamed of the emotion it betrayed. He still held her right hand, as though he could not bear to part with it, and she, of her goodness, did not seek to withdraw it after that one first effort. He held those pretty fingers pressed close within his own, as though by means of them he might still keep near to her who seemed to him

an angel sent down from the blue sky above him, not for his joy but his undoing.

She began to speak again, this time more slowly, and with a tremulous accent.

"Surely you do not remember," she said, "how it is with me?"

"That is what I do remember! that is what has driven me to this! You would tell me that you are a woman with a husband, to whom, therefore, all other spoken love save his is but an insult; but are there no exceptions to a cold rule like that? If I, loving you as I do, and if he, loving you not at all——"

"Oh! hush!" she breathed faintly, but he would not listen; the storm of his desire had caught him now in all its fury, and was hurling him along.

"Do you still believe, in such days as these, that however a man may neglect a woman she should still be loyal to him, because a few most senseless words have been read over their heads?—that she should, for that cause too, cast aside as unworthy all other love, however sacred, however earnest it might be?"

He paused and looked at her eagerly.

"Yes," said Marvel, in a soft sweet voice, "that is what I do believe."

"You cling to the traditions of your childhood," cried he impatiently; "what you then learned seems to you still to be all that is best and right. Have you never a fuller vision? Is it not possible to you to imagine something broader, more lifelike, than this dull programme you have arranged for yourself?"

He looked at her eagerly, with an impassioned air and a vague touch of impatience. Marvel stood, hesitating as it seemed to him, as he *hoped*—but in truth her silence had only to do with a desire to answer him as her heart and honest sense of right dictated. She lifted her head presently and looked fair at him, no embarrassment in her lovely eyes.

"I think," she said gently, "that a woman should respect herself. That when a name is given into her keeping, no matter in what circumstances"—with a sad flushing of the earnest brow—"she should guard it as a sacred trust."

"You mean that it is your duty to respect and guard the honour of a man who deliberately and wilfully neglects you?"

"You grow too personal," she said, still very gently, but with some dignity. "I have said that a woman should respect, not her husband so much as *herself*."

"And at the same time break her heart, and that of the man who truly loves her! and all for what? Is life so long that we can let the best of it go by, for the sake of a mere empty shell called respectability; must we be ever 'the galley-slaves of dreary forms?' Here, on this hand, is one who hardly cares whether you live or die, and here"—he drew closer to her—"is one who—Marvel! you *know* what I would say! There are other lands, other——"

"Stay, do not speak; do not, I entreat you," cried she sharply, as if in bitter fear. She raised her hands to cover her ears, and then, as if unable longer to control herself, she burst into tears. "Ah! was it indeed true that HE cared not whether she lived or died? how terrible a thought! Alas! why could *not* she die if that was all he wanted?"

At this moment Mrs. Verulam re-entered the room. She glanced first at Marvel in tears and then at Savage, white and wretched, and a rather dismayed expression came into her eyes.

"What is this? What has happened?" she asked, turning indignantly to Savage.

"It is nothing, nothing indeed!" said Marvel miserably; "it is only my own folly."

"On the contrary, my fault," interrupted Savage gloomily. "I said something to Lady Wriothesley that annoyed her. I am not, however," doggedly, "sorry that I said it."

"Then you ought to be," said Mrs. Verulam angrily. "What on earth could it have been, to reduce her to this state?"

"I told her I loved her," said he sullenly. Then he went up to Marvel. "I *wish* you wouldn't cry like that," he said angrily—"I wish I were dead rather than have made you cry, and you know it! If you have any humanity in you *stop!*"

He was indeed as white as death as he spoke, and even

Mrs. Verulam, who was very angry with him, could not doubt but that it was honest emotion, born of however wrong a cause, that made him so.

"I think you had better make up your quarrel as quickly as you can," she said impatiently. "A little more of this, and the day will begin to break. Marvel, say good-night to Mr. Savage, and come upstairs with me. You can punish him in the morning, if you will."

"There will be no morning for that sort of thing," said he mournfully. "I shall have left this by dawn. I was about to bid Lady Wriothesley farewell when you came in."

"You are going?" said Marvel.

"Yes, for ever!" He looked with haggard entreaty into Mrs. Verulam's eyes. "If I might—if you would let me be alone with her for even three minutes," he said.

Cicely hesitated, and then gave in. After all three minutes out of the rest of his lifetime was not much to grant. She went silently out of the room and closed the door behind her.

"You are really going? I shall lose my friend," said Marvel, deep sadness in her tone. All things seemed to be deserting her.

"Not if you wish it otherwise, if——" She put up her hand.

"Let our last words be such as I shall care to remember," she said brokenly.

"Tell me," said he, taking her hand and speaking as if with difficulty. "I know it already, yet—cruel as the longing is—I do long to hear it from your own lips. You —have never loved me?"

She hesitated, and grew so miserable, that he certainly knew it then, if not before.

"Dear Nigel, as a friend, I do indeed dearly love you," she said nervously. "But——"

"No; no more. It is needless," he checked her abruptly. "Good-bye," he said, taking both her hands in his; "God bless you." He bent over them, and kissed them vehemently. He seemed lost in grief, and the tears were running down her cheeks, when a sound behind them made both start.

Wriothesley was standing in the middle of the room gazing at them, profound disgust in his expression!

CHAPTER XLIX.

"My first thought was, he lied in every word."

"Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eye,
Despising what they look on."

THE disgust gave way presently to a curiously unpleasant smile.

"Are you going?" he said to Savage, who came towards him. "Pray don't let me——"

"Can you give me a few moments?" said Savage, some agitation in his tone.

"Certainly; though if you could make it one I should feel grateful."

They were outside in the hall now, and closed the door of the supper room, so that Marvel might not hear.

"Well," he said harshly. He found a strange difficulty in speaking at all, as passion was fast getting the mastery of him. He was conscious of a dangerous longing to take this man by the throat and shake the very life out of him. But he knew that it would hardly do to make a scene here and at this hour, and strove hard to control himself. He would save from blighting touch of scandal if he *could*, not her indeed—she was not worth it—but the old good name.

"I am leaving England—Europe—for an indefinite time. I start to-morrow," began Savage hurriedly. "Just now you witnessed my farewell to her. You know I love her. But," he was speaking very disconnectedly, "I feared from what you saw that you might misinterpret—might think—that Lady Wriothesley entertained for me anything warmer than the most ordinary friendship."

He stopped, hopelessly embarrassed. It was indeed the clumsiest thing, and Wriothesley put it from him, as it were, with an insulting gesture, and a short laugh.

"Not I," said he. "That Lady Wriothesley should do

you the honour to esteem you above the crowd? No! Believe me, you flatter yourself, sir, most vainly."

He ran his eye contemptuously over Savage from his head to his heel. His whole air was so studiously insolent that Savage in turn felt his wrath grow hot within him. His eyes flashed, and the colour forsook his lips, but Wriothesley, as though disdaining further converse with him, went back into the supper room and deliberately shut the door in his face.

Marvel was still standing on the hearthrug, her handkerchief to her eyes, crying softly but miserably. The sight of her, *so*, maddened Wriothesley. A very demon of rage, and shame, and disappointment shook him. He leant over the back of a chair and stared at her with eager gloomy eyes, and a cruel little sneering smile curled his lip.

"Quite right, my dear," he said slowly. "Better cry now than later on. I congratulate you on the common sense that kept you from running away with him."

Marvel's hand trembled a little, but she did not look up or change her position in any way.

"I have no doubt you think now you have reached the very lowest depths of grief," he went on in the same sneering tone. "But is it really necessary you should shed such torrents of tears? Is it good enough? The loss of that rather brigand-like lover of yours is of course a severe one, but you'll get over it. And let me assure you, that humdrum and prosaic as a respectable life with me must appear after the brilliant career he offered you, still it will be a life that will pay you better in the long run than —er—that other!"

If he thought to see her shrink from him after this abominable speech, hurt, angry, wounded, he found himself immensely mistaken. She came from behind her handkerchief indeed, and threw up her head with a pretty proud movement. She came a few steps closer to him and looked him full in the face with large indignant eyes.

"You are a very vulgar person," she said, in her clear distinct voice.

He was quite as surprised as though she had given him a little blow. The sneering demon vanished from his face,

and a great weariness took its place. He looked suddenly older, worried, and hopeless, and coming from the back of the chair, dropped languidly into the seat of it.

"I'm tired of it all," he said.

"Tired of me, you mean," said she with some spirit.

"Be that as it may, I confess I want now to be done with the whole thing. You are unhappy with me; I am—not happy with you." He made the little subtle difference in the two meanings apparent to her by the slight pause. "Let us come to some decision."

"You mean a separation." She pressed her lips hard, and hated herself passionately at the moment because of the tears she fought so wildly to subdue. She stood before him trembling, angry, in a miserable despairing—yet so lovely, so sweet—a thing

"That was whiter than thistle-down,"

that he hardly dared trust himself to look at her, lest his righteous rage should cool within him.

"Not a formal one," he said. "For Heaven's sake let us not be town-talk for the amusement of our friends. Vulgar as you deem me," with a slight frown, "I would carefully avoid *that*. But I see no reason why we should annoy each other with these perpetual scenes, and with the presence of each other."

"I don't see how you are going to manage it—just at present, at all events. You are coming with me to Cicely's, are you not?"

"Certainly not. I shall cancel that engagement. You can go your way for the future, and I shall go mine. I have had quite enough of this sort of thing. I don't care about spending the rest of my life watching you weeping over your farewells to your lovers."

"Take care!" said she in a low voice.

"Why? Can you deny he loves you? That he told you so, and more—*more*." His brow grew black again.

"If he does love me, is no reason why you should address me in such a tone. I could not prevent that—misfortune. It was no fault of mine. I had nothing to do with it."

"Of course not. No woman ever yet had. It is the regulation answer. However, let that pass. The real matter at issue is, that I shall cease to worry you with my presence. I shall accompany you and Cicely as far as town to-morrow, and then run across to Paris or somewhere."

"A charming arrangement for you, no doubt, but what of me?"

"You can go where you will. You have apparently hosts of dear friends who will gladly welcome the new fashionable beauty"—with a bitter smile—"to their houses. Whenever you tire of them, or whenever you want me to get you out of another dilemma, such as that 'lock-up' affair, you can drop me a line." He was as good as his word. In the morning he accompanied them to town, saw them into the train that would take them down to Grangemore, and bid them a calm farewell upon the platform. It was all a surprise to Cicely, and, at the first knowledge of it, a regret; but after a while she began to regard it as a salutary movement, and consoled herself with the reflection that absence has been very often proved the most beneficial of medicines.

CHAPTER L.

"If you loved me ever so little,
I could bear the bonds that gall,
I could dream the bonds were brittle:
You do not love me at all."

Six weeks of silence between them followed. Whether Wriothesley was in Paris or Timbuctoo was unknown to Marvel. February had come and gone, bringing its sweet promise of opening buds, and leaving that promise fulfilled. March had come in, in the orthodox way, with the roar of a lion enraged, but after a day or two had subsided into the tamest of animals, and was now all smiles and sweetness, to Mrs. Verulam's deep satisfaction, as her house party had arrived, and it is difficult to know what to do with the women portion of it when wintry winds do blow.

Marvel, who had a positive talent for slipping into her

clothes and looking lovely in an incredibly short space of time, had just finished her dinner toilette, and going downstairs in the rather joyless, emotionless manner that had characterized her of late, made her way into the inner drawing-room that communicated with the larger reception-room by means of hanging curtains. It was a smaller room, and cosier, and to-night she felt chilled and disinclined for the lively chatter in which she usually held a high place. She was indeed fast developing into a brilliant creature made to be copied and admired, though at heart she was still the tender loving child who held affection for and from the beloved object the supremest good on earth.

She sank with a thankful sigh into a low lounging chair, and, in the soft twilight of a glorious fire, gave herself up to thought. She was dressed as usual in a white clinging gown of lace and satin, that rose close to her throat, but left all her lovely arms naked to the shoulder. She had raised them and thrown them behind her, so that her head could rest upon the palms of her joined hands.

The firelight shone upon her thoughtful face and played amongst the soft locks that grew in a riotous confusion on her forehead. She had stretched herself in happy anticipation of no disturbance, and one daintily-shod foot was lying crossed over the other, and both were peeping from beneath the ivory satin of her skirt, that the rays from the glowing pine logs set gleaming. She made an exquisite picture lying thus in her white robes with her shining eyes filled with a certain melancholy. White was the colour she loved best, the colour her auntie had ever chosen for her.

"Do you always wear white?" Wriothesley had said to her once. "One would think you had vowed yourself to some saint, some order."

She remembered those words now, and was dwelling upon them with a half-regretful feeling that she had not so been vowed in her earlier infancy, when she looked up and saw Wriothesley push aside the heavy velvet curtains and come towards her.

"Well, you see I have come back!" he said with a rather awkward laugh.

She sprang to her feet, and stood looking at him with

parted lips and breath that came and went with a glad haste. The melancholy disappeared from her eyes, and with a movement of frank and childish pleasure she held out both hands to him.

"Why—" she said, "why—" and that was all. There was no real meaning in the foolish word, and yet a world of meaning. He did not dare to read it as it was, or he would have clasped her to his heart and prevented many an after sorrowful hour; he only took her hands and bent over them and kissed them warmly twice.

He was in his hunting things, and was rather splashed about the boots, but he looked very big and strong and handsome, and a little small sense of possessive gladness warmed her. He was hers at least, no matter how things went. No other woman could call him husband. He was smiling, as if pleased with his reception, and the well-sized patch of mud that adorned the tip of his left ear did not in her opinion detract from his appearance. She would have given anything to be able to stand on tiptoe and rub it off, however, but she felt that she could not do it without a consciousness that would have rendered the act unpardonably awkward.

She withdrew her hands and sat down once more in her chair. Wriothesley drew up another and seated himself opposite to her on the hearthrug; both looked hard at the fire, as though intent on warming themselves, and altogether it was a veritable Darby and Joan sort of a picture, taken from a superficial glance at it. But already that awkwardness she so dreaded was descending upon them; and that first kind touch of nature was dying beneath an irrepressible restraint.

"I did not know you were here—in the country," she said at last in a rather uncertain tone.

"I suppose not. I ran down to the Carringtons yesterday, and after a capital run to-day found myself close to the Grange, so I thought I'd look in for a moment to see how you and Cicely were getting on."

He spoke with quite a severe assumption of indifference, and naturally it angered her.

"It was so good of you," she said with a little icy smile.

"But how foolish to come so late. How will you be back in time for their dinner? It is quite a quarter past eight, I should think, now."

He pulled out his watch and looked at it.

"By Jove! so it is. I expect I had better be on the move again," he said; but he did not rise from his seat.

"If you will dine here——" she began coldly.

"Oh no, thanks—not for the world. They will be expecting me at Carringtons. It—er—isn't much of a ride there, and they don't dine to-night till nine."

"It is quite six miles," she said severely.

"I suppose you want to get rid of me," rising at last with a short laugh. "Well, I'm glad to have seen you looking so well, and," emphatically, "so *happy!* Good-night."

He held out his hand.

"You are wrong. I shouldn't mind if you sat there all night," she said quickly, "and at least you will let me give you a cup of tea." She touched the bell near her, and as a servant entered gave him some directions. "As to my looking well and happy," she said resentfully, "did you wish it otherwise? And don't you think you are looking very well yourself?"

Too well! she told herself as she watched him through the shadows. If he had looked even a little pulled down, she could have felt more amiably disposed towards him; but to sneer at her for her good looks when he himself was the very personification of health and spirits, was just a little too bad.

"I never felt better, certainly," replied he coolly.

After this there was a considerable pause. Wriothesley leaning forward on his seat, with his elbow on his knee and his hand stroking his moustache, stared moodily into the fire. Marvel, finding a tray placed ready to her, busied herself pouring out a cup of tea.

"Do you take sugar?" she asked, more as a means of breaking the unpleasant silence than from a want of knowledge.

"Good heavens! We have been married for a year and a half, and don't you know that yet?" said he, with unreasonable irritation.

"You do?" waiting with sugar-tongs upraised.

"I do."

"Here is your tea," she said a second later, standing beside him, tall, pale, and slender, in the fire-beams.

"Thank you." He started slightly, not knowing she was so near, and took the cup from her, and laid it on the rug at his feet. "How strange you look in that white gown," he said; "like a bride or a dead girl. Did I speak roughly to you? I don't know why it is that one so soft and young and pale as you can have such power to irritate me. I am always hurting you, it seems to me. That night we were last together, you remember? I have been sorry about that many times. I would have written, saying so, but I could not be sure that you would care. Would you?"

He took the little slim hand that hung by her side, and that was covered with rings—she loved them for their beauty as a child might—and pressed it gently. He waited eagerly for her answer, with such a decided eagerness indeed that it awoke in her one of those strange perverse moods that poor human nature is ever heir to.

"Not much," she said with a mutinous, if lovely, glance at him sideways out of her expressive eyes.

"Ah!" said he. He let her hand go, took up his cup and drank his tea hurriedly. He was bitterly offended.

> "See a word, how it severeth!
> Oh, power of life and death
> In the tongue, as the Preacher saith!"

He took no more notice of her, as she stood, frightened now, and grieved for her hardness; but pushing back his chair, he straightened himself as a man will before taking his departure.

"Please tell Cicely I am sorry not to have seen her; but I fear I cannot afford another moment. Good-night, good-bye."

"Not good-bye," faltered she penitently; "you are so close to us, and—Fulke," in a very small voice, "I didn't mean that. I—I would have cared."

"Is that the truth, my dear?" said he very sadly, "or

was that other answer it? Who shall say?" He lifted her face with his hand, and looked earnestly at it in the firelight.

"Oh, do believe what I now say," entreated she in a choked tone. "I don't know why I said——"

"Well, I'll try," said he. He stooped and kissed her cheek, and a moment later was gone.

Almost as he left, Cicely entered the room by another door.

"What are you doing here, you foolish person, in the dark, and all by yourself? I've sought you 'upstairs and downstairs and in my lady's chamber,' all to no avail. Come out of this Cimmerian gloom into the 'higher lights;' the others are all in the rose room."

"I have not been so alone as I seem. I have been giving Fulke his tea."

"Fulke!" She feigned her surprise very well, the fact being that she knew of Wriothesley's intended visit to the Carringtons, and was only now a little amused that he should have put in an appearance here quite so soon. It augured well, she thought, for Marvel's future.

"Bad halfpennies are always safe to turn up again," she said, with a tilt of her pretty nose. She had taken to abusing Wriothesley of late. "One might have known he would not leave us long in peace undisturbed. Did you have tea with him?" peering into the second cup. "Pouf! what a madness, to chance the spoiling of a good dinner for the sake of showing courtesy to one who—— Well, at all events, I hope you had a long spoon; when one sups with the devil, one——"

"Fulke is not exactly a devil," said Marvel, with a touch of reproach in her manner.

"True. He'd be more endurable if he were! The lukewarm ones of the earth, the half and halfs, are the truly contemptible. As he happens to be in the neighbourhood, however, I suppose I had better write and ask him to reconsider his refusal to lend us the light of his countenance for a week or two. Eh?"

"As you will," said Marvel, with studious indifference.

"As you will, rather. I thought you were anxious to prove to your friends that you felt no emotion at seeing him

and Mrs. Scarlett *en tete-a-tete* every day and all day long. However, if you object to his coming, why say so, dearest child, and your wish shall be law. Not for worlds would I ask him here, if his coming were to cause you any unpleasantness." Her eyes were laughing, and Marvel knew she was insincere in her sympathetic protestations.

"It will not cause me unpleasantness," she said demurely, whereupon Cicely laughed aloud.

"You are a hypocrite," she said. "Take care lest I punish you by withholding that invitation I spoke of."

CHAPTER LI.

"When I take the humour of a thing once, I am like your tailor's needle,—I go through."

EVEN now, well into the middle of boisterous March as it was, the weather still maintained a smiling face. To-day was almost warm, if one contrasted it with those of a fortnight ago. There was a perfume of primroses in the air, and delicate fern fronds were beginning to peep in shaded corners of the shady woods.

Mrs. Verulam, who had disposed of most of her guests by sending the women to look after the men who had gone shooting in the early part of the morning, stood at the window of her summer parlour, and at last, emboldened by the sweetness of the view without, flung the casements wide, and leant out to enjoy the keen flower-scented air.

The wind that had howled all night was now dead. It had dropped perhaps behind the great purple-tinted hills beyond that overhung the placid ocean, and

> "Only there sighed from the pine-tops
> A music of sea far away."

It was a delicious day, she told herself, and the sense that she was alone to enjoy it rather added to its charm. She was tired of entertaining people, she thought; and for once to be able to sit silently and drink in the cool freshness of this king of days was a real joy.

Just as she had come to this conclusion she heard a step behind her. She turned impatiently to find herself face to face with Sir George Townshend. Good heavens! Was she never to escape this man? She threw up her hands with quite a pathetic appeal.

"You? Is it to be always you?" she said in a tone of despair.

"Well, I hope so," replied he. "What did you expect? That I should turn into somebody else? You wouldn't like me to do a low trick like that, would you? A conjuror may be a most agreeable person, I've no doubt, but not the sort of creature with whom you would like to link your fate, eh?"

"That is quite a remarkable speech," coldly. "You surely don't expect me to follow it. What I want to know *only*, is why you are not at Lydon Spinney with the others."

"I was afraid to trust myself with a gun when Castlerock was of the party. I felt it would be certain to go off of its own accord the moment the muzzle was pointed in his direction. And I'm not sure the time for such an act is ripe. By-the-by, as we are on the subject, you may as well tell me now when I am to blossom into the full-blown murderer?"

Lord Castlerock, who was staying at Grangemore, had been very assiduous in his attentions to its pretty mistress for the past ten days; and though Sir George was by no means jealous of him, he thought it as well to let her know he was not blind to his meaning, and that, in fact, he quite understood all about it.

"Never, I hope," she said, looking back at him from the open window that led to the verandah without—a window that framed her in and made a pretty picture of her in her furs and laces. "You are quite obnoxious enough as you are."

"Nevertheless, I only wait to hear you name your wedding-day with Castlerock, to fall upon him and hack him in pieces."

"You will be free from crime of *that sort* for a long time if you wait to hear that."

"You cannot deny, however, that he intends prostrating himself at your feet at the earliest opportunity. I can see it in his eye all to-day and yesterday. And there is Bellingham also. He is going the same road."

"I shouldn't care if there were twenty of them all travelling together. At least *they* will have the grace to take their 'No,' and be done with it." This with a glance of scorn. "It is very foolish of them, no doubt, but it will not make me uncomfortable."

"It will, I think. To turn away twenty broken-hearted men, one after the other, will be a wearying of the flesh to you. Now if you would marry me, you see there would be an end of all that sort of thing."

"And the commencement of a worse! Besides," impatiently, "have I not just told you (only you never will listen to a word I say) that I have no objection to men making themselves ridiculous about me. They are sure to do it about something or other, so it may just as well be me. And it adds a little zest to one's life. Now if I were mad enough to marry you, or any one, all that would be at an end."

"Why should it? I'll bind myself in the settlements to propose to you regularly the first Monday in every month, and then you won't have anything to regret."

"Pshaw!" said she, rising abruptly, as if disgusted with his frivolity.

"Won't it do? Every Monday in every week then. There, that's a noble offer, if you like!"

She stepped out on to the verandah.

"When people cannot talk sense they should not talk at all," she said, and moved away from him, past the creepers that clung to the balustrades, to the most distant seat that the sheltered verandah held. He instantly picked up a low American cane chair, and dragging it leisurely behind him, came up to her with the little creaking noise it made, and seated himself as close to her as circumstances would permit—with all the air of one who was settling down for a nice long cosy chat.

"Now that is one of the many points on which we are both so entirely agreed," he said comfortably; "and that

is why I am always so careful to talk nothing but the severest sense."

No answer.

"Well, and when am I to polish off Castlerock?" he asked presently.

"My dear friend, if you must talk your usual inanities, please let them be in English that may be 'understanded of the people.'"

"As you despise my flowers of speech, so be it. When, then, are you to marry Castlerock?"

"Nonsense! You should know me a little too well for that. What on earth should I do with Castlerock? Why should I (who have determined not to risk my happiness a second time) marry a great, stupid—er—podgy sort of man!"

"Podgy! That is an excellent word," said he reflectively, "for Castlerock. Now if you object to podginess, why not marry *me?* I am long, and lank, and lean enough in all conscience to suit the most æsthetic taste. And as for stupidity, if you really have an aversion to that which raises you far above your fellows, why—there you are!" throwing out his hands expansively. "All the world knows what a brilliant creature I am!"

"It is sufficient for me, what I know of you," replied she coolly. And then she murmured some little speech that had the word "obstinate" in it, and another word too. "I am not going to marry you either," she said presently.

"Well—perhaps not just this moment," said he pleasantly, "the day is rather far advanced." He drew a little nearer to her and watched the rapid movement of her fingers for a minute or so. "What are you doing?" he asked curiously.

"Knitting—or at least *trying* to," impatiently. "But how can I remember the stitches when you talk so much? It is a new pattern, and still puzzles me. Do—*do* try to be silent, if only for a little while."

"I shall be silent for ever after if you will only have me. But so long as you keep on refusing me, I must of course go on asking you."

"I wonder you aren't ashamed!" exclaimed she suddenly, laying down her work to gaze at him with open scorn.

"Of what?"

"Of going on like that."

"Like what?"

"A spoiled child asking for a sugar plum he mustn't have!"

"I am glad you regard yourself in such a pleasant light—though 'sugar plum,' I confess, is not the word *I* should have applied to you."

"I did not mean it for myself," blushing faintly; "I was merely——"

"Drawing a little figure for my instruction, I know. But bitters now would be nearer to it, eh? That name would suit you better. And, at all events, it would suit me better; more stimulating, not so nauseating. And—why can't I have my bitters?"

Here Mrs. Verulam maintaining a dignified silence, Sir George edged a little nearer to her still.

"That is abominable work you are doing," he said, fixing his eyeglass firmly in his eye and staring at the work in question over her shoulder with a critical gaze. "One, two, three; one, two, three; one, two, three, four. Why, any one would think you were learning the piano all over again."

"I am learning nothing," cried she in despair, laying down the hopeless knitting on her knee and turning on him a wrathful countenance. "You have put me out now irretrievably with your silly counting. I really wish you would either go away altogether (that would be far the best plan), or else be quiet for even a short while."

"I have just told you," serenely, "that you have only to say one little word and I will be quiet for ever."

Mrs. Verulam pushed back her chair and rose majestically to her feet. There was the light of a stern resolve upon her brow.

"George, you have conquered!" she said in a low, but awe-inspiring voice, "I shall marry you, if only to be revenged upon you."

Sir George got up instantly. He stretched out his long, sinewy arms and gave himself a mighty shake. A smile illumined his melancholy countenance.

"It would have saved a considerable deal of valuable time and argument if you had come to that wise decision two years ago," he said.

"Mark my words, however, you will live to rue this day."

"If I do I'll tell you about it. In the meantime, I have your promise?"

"Yes. I hope," petulantly, whilst trying not to smile, "you are satisfied now?"

"I am the happiest man on earth. Come," tucking his arm within hers, "let us go for a stroll round the garden."

CHAPTER LII.

In one brief sentence all my sorrows dwell."

THEY were dragged from their garden of Eden about an hour later by the early return of some of the shooting party. She went to meet them in the charming inner hall, where they stood talking and laughing and warming themselves by the great fires in the stoves whilst tea was being brought to them. Cicely came upon them, accompanied by Sir George, and with a little radiant air; and Marvel, who was quick to read the signs of joy or grief in the eyes of those she loved, saw at once that something had happened to her.

She took advantage of a moment when Mrs. Verulam stood rather apart from the rest to go up to her and whisper softly:

"Is it so, then?"

"Who shall guard a secret from thee, oh thou marvellous one!" returned Cicely gaily, but with a little tremor in her voice that meant much. Then some of the others drew near again, and Marvel, with a smile of tenderest sympathy, moved away.

She was sincerely glad at heart, joyful indeed for her friend's sake, yet never as at this moment had she felt so entirely lonely. She escaped after awhile from the merry crowd and wandered aimlessly into one of the smaller rooms that opened off the library.

Here despair seized upon her. The happiness of another, though it had her warmest sympathy, yet opened up to her the wretched poverty of her own existence. She was nothing, nobody, an unloved wife, a creature without known parentage. She stood in the window, gazing mutely out on the fast darkening gardens and gave herself up to the gloomy misery of the moment.

All the world was happy; she alone was debarred life's choicest gifts. What hope could there be for such as she? Even—oh, most improbable of suppositions—even were she to gain her husband's love, the mournful fact that the story of her birth was wrapped in mystery—that in all probability it contained all the elements of the most shameful shame—would come between them always.

In their very sweetest moments, when his lips lay on hers, would he not still remember that the woman who bore his old and honoured name was herself nameless, that the mother of his children was herself far worse than motherless? Then—then he would shrink from her. Oh, the bitterness of it! Only a week ago that pale, smiling enemy of hers—that woman whom once he had so loved—had whispered such a hint into her ears—had in subtle words warned her that so, and for such reasons, in their very fondest hours, he would shrink from her as from a creature loathed.

Instinctively she put up her hand and drew the locket from her neck and gazed as if fascinated upon the pale, cynical features hidden within it. At this moment she believed she would have bartered all her wildest hopes, nay, life itself, to learn the secret those dead lips could tell, to know the truth as it was, bare and undisguised. For what cruel thing can be deadlier cruel than suspense?

A long, long sigh rose from her burdened heart. It seemed to her so *little* a thing that she desired. Not wealth, not fame, not a high and honourable ancestry; only a *name.* And the very lowest, the very poorest had that! And the very lowest, the very poorest name would do for her; she craved no more. Not position, or a high sounding title; nothing but the assurance that she was honestly born. Yet this small boon was denied her!

Alas! was she never to know content? Cicely had gained all; she could not doubt, having once looked into her radiant eyes, that having given in and broken down the wall of determination she had built against a second marriage—that now she was roaming in a realm where perfect bliss held sway. A great envy rose within her, envy that did not hurt her friend, but that rebelled against the difference betwixt Cicely's fate and hers. She would not have had Cicely descend to her poor level, but she would fain have risen to hers. It was all so unequal. Where was justice, or mercy, or that hope that keeps our souls alive?

She started violently as a hand was laid upon her shoulder, and another hand seized upon that fatal locket and took it forcibly from her.

"Brooding, as usual, over the irrevocable," said Wriothesley angrily. "Good gracious! what a senseless woman you are. Can you not grasp the fact that what is *is*, and that not all the protestations and bemoanings in the world can alter it. I shall destroy that talisman of yours some day; it works you only evil." He flung the locket from him as he spoke on to the middle of the table nearest him. "So let your forebodings go," he said.

"They cling too fast for that," returned she with a sad smile.

"Come out of this cold, uncomfortable room. See, the fire is quite dead. No wonder you have worked yourself into a fit of the blues." He led her through the folding doors into the library beyond, which was empty, but rich in the possession of a glorious fire. He closed the folding doors again, and pressed her gently into the depths of a huge armchair that adorned one side of the hearth. "Now confess you are looking through spectacles a little less grey," he said. He looked at her as he spoke, and the fact that she was *compelling* herself to smile became apparent to him.

"If by going from one room to another we could leave our griefs behind us, how incessantly we should be on the move, what a restless people we should become," she said. "We should learn at last the meaning of perpetual motion."

"What a melancholy view to take of life!—what a face,

a tone! What has so changed you, Marvel? You were a merry child when—when I married you. You are now sad and grave to an excess. Am I to believe," remorsefully, "that it is I who have spoiled your life?"

"You! oh no."

"Your marriage with me, then?"

"That in part," said she with a gentle truthfulness, "because it is harder than you know to live unloved; but that other thing," she paled and turned away from him, "the knowledge that shame rests upon my birth, *that* is the thing that hurts and galls, and kills each happy moment."

"Why can you not learn to forget, as others do?"

"Do they? Who can be sure of that? And, at all events, it is not possible to me. Even in my dreams that shame lives with me!" She lifted her shining, miserable eyes to his. "When I see all these people, when I mix with them; when you see me laughing, and apparently as light-hearted as they, do you ever *know* how it is with me? I am not so deaf that I cannot hear a word there, a whisper here. They admire, yes, if you will, but as a thing apart. I am not one of them."

"A charm in itself," lightly.

"One I do not appreciate," bitterly. "I would willingly forget that I am nameless."

"You are not that, certainly."

"But Marvel! What a name! One given me by you in a moment's freak! A name not blessed by church or priest."

"You have another, however. I beg you will not put that out of remembrance—Craven. That at least was blessed by church and priest. You cannot deny it."

"I would, indeed, that I could," said she with such a solemn melancholy, and with such deep sincerity of tone, that he glanced at her keenly.

"An ungracious speech," he said.

"Oh, no," quickly. "I did not mean it so, it was for your sake alone I made it. Do you know," regarding him wistfully, "I sometimes wonder at you. You have been so very good to me, so kind." She broke off unsteadily and

lifted her hand to her round girlish throat, as if to still the throbbing there. "Sometimes, too, I ask myself why it is you do not *curse* me."

"Marvel!" he spoke in a quick, shocked tone, and drew away her hand from her throat and held it firmly.

"I do," she went on rapidly, passionately. "I will speak now, if for the last time. But for my folly, our marriage would never have been. It is all my fault—all! I should never have married you! My unknown birth, nay, my birth that may be worse than unknown, because known to be dishonourable at any moment, should have been a barrier between us. *She* told me that."

"She? Who?"

"Mrs. Scarlett. She has," bitterly, "your interests very much at heart. She told me very frankly that she hated me because I had ruined your life—that my unhappy position, as a mere stray flung up out of the mire of the world at your feet, was the one thing you cannot forgive—that I am the solitary blot upon the old name so dear to you. She said so much, so much! Oh!" the tears starting to her eyes, "she should not have *said* it. I knew it, I felt it all, long ago!" She covered her eyes with her hands. "It was cruel!" she said breathlessly.

"Damnably so!" said Wriothesley, who had turned rather white. "And a lie into the bargain. Were you this instant proved to be——"

"Oh, don't!" she cried with fierce pain, putting up her hands to check him. "Don't put it into words. I cannot bear it!" Then she grew calmer. "And why, too, should you forswear yourself for me? I am nothing, I need be nothing to you. That I trouble, that I fetter you, I know, but what," with a miserable appealing glance, "can I do? You must only wait for death to set you free from me. Day by day I pray for it, yet it never comes. What else can I do?" She was trembling. Suddenly she looked up at him. "There is one thing that hurts me," she said with the nervous abruptness of a child, "that you should have loved her."

"What one of us but bears the scars of some past folly," exclaimed he quickly. "At least you do me justice in

acknowledging that such a love is dead. Once, I admit, I loved her, wildly, unreasonably, yet I have lived to bless Heaven that my wishes then (in that mad past) were denied me. I swear to you that now she is hateful in my sight."

At this moment the doors communicating with the room they had just left were again flung open, violently this time, and Mrs. Scarlett stood on the threshold. She looked old, haggard, wild. She held something clutched in her right hand, and as she advanced into the room she held it out to Marvel. It was the battered old locket that Wriothesley had taken from his wife and flung upon the table.

"Where did you get this?" she cried hoarsely. "Is it yours? Speak, girl."

"It is mine, yes," said Marvel, going forward quickly as if to take it, but Mrs. Scarlett waved her back.

"Where did you get it?" she demanded again. "Why do you hesitate? Answer me, I command you!"

Marvel drew back and glanced at Wriothesley as if frightened, as if imploring his support.

"Pray try to control yourself, when addressing Lady Wriothesley," he said with a look full of ill-suppressed anger directed at Mrs. Scarlett. "If, indeed," coldly, "it be necessary that you should speak to her at all."

"Do you hear me? Answer," said she, precisely as though she had not heard him, which, indeed, she had not. "Where did you get this thing?"

"I cannot tell you that. I do not know," said Marvel, speaking as though compelled to it by some superior force. "All I know is that it was round my neck on that night when I was abandoned to the fury of the storm, and was rescued from it by——" She turned with a rather dreamy confused air, and held out her hand to Wriothesley. Once again that pitiless storm seemed to break above her head.

"You! you!" cried Mrs. Scarlett, in a low piercing tone that was barely above a whisper. "That, of all others, it should be *you!* Sweet Heaven, what a revenge for you." She paused and gasped as if for breath. "All along the truth was bare to me, and I would not see; but when this picture," crushing the locket between her fingers, "looked back at me as I gazed on it, I knew."

"Knew what?" demanded Marvel, leaning forward with parted lips.

"That the face within this trinket is that of your father."

"My father!" the words fell from her in a little hushed tone. At last, at last was she to learn the mystery of her life; and through this woman. Her heart sank within her. "It *is* he, then," she said faintly. "But you—what do you know of him? You——"

All at once an awful expression grew within her eyes. Her face blanched to a deathly pallor. Sometimes like lightning-strokes the undreamt-of truth descends upon us, but still she made a last faint struggle against it. "You are not——" she faltered and shrank back shivering. "Oh no! Oh no!" she cried in wildest protestation.

"You have guessed it, I am *your mother*," said Mrs. Scarlett.

CHAPTER LIII.

"Was life worth living then? and now is life worth sin?"

MARVEL did not move. She stood pale, motionless, as one smitten into marble. A great wave of emotion, strong, terrible, swept over her face, leaving it as colourless as a spent lily. There was horror in it, mingled with a wild hope, and there was dread and a curious longing.

As for Mrs. Scarlett she seemed all at once to have fallen into the grasp of relentless age. Her mouth had grown thin and drawn, her eyes sunken. She stood staring at Marvel with a gaze that was terrible because of the intensity of it. So this girl, whose life she had been slowly poisoning for the past four months, was her own daughter. Her own child! She had brought together all her ingenuity, all the subtle forces of her teeming brain, to compass what?—the destruction, body and soul, of this creature who by all rights, human and divine, should be the most sacred thing to her on earth. She had hated her with a bitter relentless hatred, yet all through it seemed to her now that she had *known!* The truth had pressed itself upon her, at certain moments

had stood out boldly before her, daring her to disbelieve; yet she had thrust it from her. But not for a minute now did she attempt to deceive herself. That pale slender child over there, Wriothesley's wife, was the link between her and the dead past that she had so loathed, and feared to find.

A silence that was full of a strange fascination had fallen upon all three; but Wriothesley after awhile broke it.

"You have created an admirable situation," he said, unpleasantly—"a very dramatic *dénouement*, but you will pardon me if I say I should like to hear something about the commencement of your plot."

"You would hear?" she said slowly, turning upon him the old enigmatical smile that now was tinged with cruelty. "Well, you shall."

She had overheard that last remark of his, uttered just as she entered the room, and the flavour of it still rankled in her mouth. Much as she had hated Marvel, more by a thousandfold did she detest this man who now stood before her, sneering, sceptical, contemptuous—who had once been her lover!

"But first a question or two." She turned to Marvel. "This locket, you say it was found on you the night Lady Mary Craven took you into her house. That night—tell me of it."

"There was a storm," said Marvel confusedly; "it was a wild tempestuous night. Often and often it all comes back to me. The roaring as of many winds; the dense darkness; the crashing of the branches overhead; the screaming of some seabirds from the shore below; and then the stepping out of the blackness of death, as it were, into the full sweet glare of life."

"A storm! Yes. And how many years ago was it? How old were you then?"

"Three. More perhaps. I cannot tell."

"Four," curtly. "Now, do you remember anything of the woman who abandoned you on that night?"

"It is such a vague memory, I cannot describe her," said Marvel in a distressed tone, that contrasted oddly with the suppressed vehemence of the other; "she was old—worn——"

"It seems to me," said Wriothesley, breaking brusquely in upon her speech but addressing Mrs. Scarlett, "it is our own tale we are hearing and not yours. You have made a most extraordinary assertion, and I must ask you to verify it without help from us."

He identified himself so persistently with his wife that the latter looked up at him with shining luminous eyes, and moved involuntarily nearer to him.

"Do you think I am trying to make up a story?" said she with a short laugh. "Why, how would it serve me to cumber myself now with a daughter grown? And are you indeed in such mad haste to hear what I have got to tell? Well, hear it." There was defiance in the glance she cast at him, but there was exhaustion in the air with which she sank into a chair near her.

"When I was her age," she began, indicating Marvel by a slight gesture, "there came to the dull secluded village, where I lived alone with my father, a young man. My father was well born but poor, and therefore of small account; the young man was rich. A very orthodox beginning to a romance, eh?" with a cold sneering laugh. "There was good hunting in the neighbourhood and he took a house for the season about three miles from where we lived. He saw me, met me, loved me. It sounds like the famous Cæsarean speech, but has even more truth in it. I *was* lovable then I assume," with a swift and bitter glance at Wriothesley—"I was like *her*." She waved her hand towards Marvel.

"His name?" asked Wriothesley shortly.

"Must you know that too? Well, it hardly matters. Brandreth—Brandreth Boileau." She moistened her lips as though they were parched and dry, and a long breath came from her white lips. "It is so long since I have uttered that name, that almost I find a difficulty in speaking it," she said heavily, with a vain attempt at lightness that failed to hide the agony that shone within her sombre eyes. "He loved me, as I have said, but marriage with me would have been ruin to every worldly hope he had. There was the inevitable uncle, rich, childless, titled; the title would pass to Brandreth, but very little of the estates were en

tailed, and the barren honour of calling himself a lord would not have sufficed him, would hardly indeed have kept body and soul together in that state of life to which we have been called. And the old man, the uncle, had other views for him. To disappoint them meant disinheritance. So we loved—in silence, in secrecy, and then——"

She raised her hand to her throat as if suffocating.

"Then—five months after we had met—he died!"

She paused and pressed the palm of her hand upon the locket lying on the table as if she would have crushed it in her pain.

"It was a railway accident. It was useless to do anything; he was a whole day dead before I heard of it. Still—cold—the beauty frozen on his face. Oh!"

Her voice died away in a long gasping sigh and she smote her hands together.

"There was nothing but him for me. All the world was only him, and he was dead!" There was intolerable anguish in her tone, anguish fresh as though the story of her woe had been first told an hour agone. "Yet *I* lived!" she said.

She swayed a little. It became evident to Wriothesley that apart from the excitement of the moment and the cruelty of the memories she had evoked, she was extremely ill. But as he stepped forward to help her, she roused herself and drove him back from her with an imperious gesture.

"Don't touch me! Do you think I am such a feeble thing," she said, "that even *such* memories will kill me! Pah! you do not understand; you could not love like that. Well, he was dead. It was all over, and then, just then, I found that she," pointing to Marvel, who stood with head down-bent, and face ashen pale, "was to be born; that was the cruellest sting of all!"

A slight sound broke from Marvel; Wriothesley held up an entreating hand.

"Spare her what you can," he begged.

"Why should I spare her—even one pang?" said she coldly, in the low even tone she had employed all through. "Was I spared? did *I* not suffer? Who came to my assistance when I knew not what to do, or where to turn to hide

my head? At that time too my father died; I thanked God for that."

For the first time a soft, a human light grew within her eyes.

"*He never knew*," she said.

Somehow as those words passed her lips, Marvel's soul died within her. She drew herself away from Wriothesley's protecting arm, and a low moan broke from her.

"You have heard enough for to-day. Wait; hear the rest another time," said he anxiously.

"No, no," feverishly. "Do you think I *could* wait? Let me have it all at once; is suspense a light burden?"

"There was a woman," went on Mrs. Scarlett in her low monotone, that now had no emotion in it, "an elderly woman, my own nurse she had been, and in her I confided. Together we left home and sought a remote village on the Cornwall coast, and there—*you* were born." She lifted her eyes to Marvel's with a reluctant dislike. "Even then," she said, "as you lay helpless, powerless, within my arms, I *hated* you!"

She pushed back the hair from her forehead and drew a long breath. She laughed a little.

"It is true," she said; "the very brute beast will love its offspring, but I—I *loathed* mine! As soon as I dared stir, I forsook you, and left you with my nurse. An aunt of mine with whom I had kept up a desultory sort of correspondence, and who was well married and living in the world, wrote asking me to go and live with her. I gladly consented; I even grasped at the chance. It opened out to me a way of retrieving my folly and making myself such a place in the world as I had ever hoped for. But you—*you*," looking at Marvel, "you destroyed all—you, and *this*."

Again she laid her hand upon the locket wherein lay the dead man's face. The man who alone had ever touched her worldly heart, for whose sake she had been deaf and blind evermore to the attractions of all others. It was the one saving clause in her cold, calculating ambitious nature—that one wild absorbing passion of her youth.

"I feared the discovery of you—you hung like a millstone round my neck," she said, still with her reluctant gaze fixed

on Marvel, who shrank and shivered before her. "And the woman who kept you grew greedy for her claims. She wrote always for money, and I had none to give. Though living in affluence with that rich woman—curse her!" said she suddenly with an awful bitterness, "I had not one penny ever that I could call my own. I had dresses, trinkets, but no pocket money to speak of. Once she discovered me trying to pawn a ring, and after that there was no single moment that I could call my own. Perhaps she suspected something, I never knew, but at all events the woman—the nurse—though importunate was faithful; she never betrayed me. Still, when she found she could get no money from me, she tired of you," turning cold cruel eyes on Marvel, "tired, as have all the others!"

"Oh! no. Oh! have pity," said the girl in a slow painful tone that went to Wriothesley's heart.

"You would have the truth. Now *bear* it," said she relentlessly. "Yes, even that woman who nursed you would fain be rid of you when she discovered that I could not supply her with the money needful for your wants and her extortionate demands. Your birth was a horror to me," slowly; "the thought of you a constant, never-dying fear. When, at the end of four years, the woman wrote to me to say you were dead—*I rejoiced.*"

She spoke with such deliberate malignancy that Wriothesley's blood rose to his face. He glanced compassionately at Marvel. She was pale, an icy chill seemed to have passed over her; she shuddered.

"Then—*at last*—I felt free: the hateful chain that bound me was loosed. I blessed death from my very heart. An old man, rich, pliable—a hideous old man—had been my suitor for some time; just then he offered himself to me for the third time and I accepted him. I married Mr. Scarlett, and for the first time for five years a sense of rest stole over me. It lasted for seven years; then I had a letter from the nurse to say she was dying; that she was indeed at the very point of death; that I should come to her, and quickly if I would see her alive and hear from her own lips that which would influence my entire life." She was silent for a moment as if thinking.

"I arrived at her house a day after the summons reached me. A day too late! I found her at the very portals of that city we all so fear to enter. She had barely sufficient strength left to tell me that the child whom she had taken from me and whom she had sworn was dead, was still living!"

Perhaps she lied," said Wriothesley hoarsely.

"No; the dying seldom lie, and there was that on her face which forbids the thought of it. She said she had found it impossible to support herself and the child on the small and uncertain sums I was able to send to her from time to time, so that at last she became determined to rid herself of her nursling by leaving her secretly at some workhouse where she was unknown. One evening, with this purpose in her mind, she set out with the child, and for many days wandered vaguely inland, not knowing how or fearing to accomplish it. Her heart, she said, failed her as each occasion presented itself; but for myself I don't believe in hearts—had she said her courage failed I should have understood."

She shrugged her shoulders slightly and a faint sneer curled her lips.

"At last there came a night when, as they trudged wearily, aimlessly along the highway, a storm burst above their heads; it drove them to the gate of a long dark avenue. On the instant a thought came to the woman; she pushed open the gate and sped quickly with the child between the rows of stately limes until the white lights of the house gleaming on the awful darkness told her the fulfilment of her desire was at hand.

"In the pitch blackness who could see her lowering the baby to the ground? She fought her way through the roaring winds and blinding rain to the steps of a stone staircase that evidently led to a room above, from which shone out the yellow glare of lamps. There she abandoned the child, and with a last parting command to her to climb the steps, deserted her for ever."

"A worthy accomplice of a worthy mother," said Wriothesley bitterly.

"Nay, sir! your hatred runs away with you. She was no accomplice of mine. You have paid but ill heed to my

words or you would remember that all this that she breathed to me on her dying bed was new and most unwelcome tidings."

"Do not speak—do not interrupt—let me hear it all—*all!*" entreated Marvel, turning upon him a look of anguish.

"Well, there is more to tell?" questioned he, in answer to her appeal, addressing Mrs. Scarlett.

"No. No more. So far she had got in her narrative when she lifted herself high upon her pallet, stared wildly at me, made a last fearful effort to speak, and then dropped back like a stone upon her pillow. I seized her. I called aloud to her to name the village near which the child had been left, but all in vain. I even shook her violently, the disappointing, dying thing, hoping thus to recall her, if only for one moment, to a sense of this life, but I failed. I even think," angrily, "that my violence frustrated my own hopes, that that last shake hurried her entrance into oblivion! At all events she was dead, and with her went every chance of learning the truth."

"What was the child's name?" asked Wriothesley abruptly.

"Margaret she had been christened. Meg, the woman called her. For me, I called her nothing."

"Meg." As a long past dream suddenly recurs to one's memory, bringing with it a train of thought that had seemed dead and buried this many a day, so now there rushed upon the minds of Marvel and Wriothesley a remembrance of that past, wild, yet happy hour when a little child had been drawn in by loving hands from the damp and death of night to the warmth of a fireside shelter—a little child, so small, so cold, that her white lips could scarcely tell them that her name was "M'g." They had not known what it meant then—the boy who was now a man, the woman who now was dead—but the man remembered and turned his eyes on Marvel with even a gentler tenderness than he had betrayed before.

That little vague sound "M'g" had meant "Meg"—Margaret. Alas! for the sorrow of it, thought he, dwelling on her grief alone, giving no thought to his own natural regret.

At this moment Marvel lifted her head.

CHAPTER LIV.

"Even ev'ry ray of hope destroy'd,
And not a *wish* to gild the gloom."

SHE was deadly pale. Her eyes gleamed. She came right up to Mrs. Scarlett and laid a burning hand on hers.

"I have heard all," she said. "But there is one thing *yet*. There was a marriage between you and——." She pointed to the open locket. "Say *so!*" There was silence. Her face now was ghastly, and mechanically she laid both her slender palms on Mrs. Scarlett's arms and shook her to and fro. "Say *it!*" she said, her voice being almost a command.

A malignant smile lit up the other's face. She flung the girl from her with a little swift gesture and turned her eyes full on Wriothesley.

"There was no marriage!" she said. "Why should I lie to please you?" slowly glancing round at Marvel. "No, there was no marriage. He lived; he loved; he died; that was all."

She broke into a wild laugh.

"Does it hurt you?" she cried, and then in a slow, venomous way, "I am *glad* of it. Ah! how often you have hurt me."

A quiver ran through Marvel's slender frame. She caught hold suddenly of one of the curtains near her as if to steady herself, and then with a deplorable gesture turned her face to the wall.

She leant her arms against it, and her head on them; if she could have hidden herself away, and shut out from her the world's light for ever, she would have done so. Where indeed was rest, or peace, or light, to be found for her ever again? How should she endure the glare of this earth's scrutiny in all the years to come?

There was something so forlorn in her attitude, there was such an abandonment in it to an eternal despair, that it maddened Wriothesley. He went up to her and tried eagerly to draw her to him, but she resisted him with

such a passionate vehemence that he did not dare to insist.

He turned from her and directed all the grief and sorrow and indignation in him, that made his heart sore, on her who was the author of it.

"You see!" he said, indicating Marvel by a gesture. "Are you satisfied? Your devilish acts have brought her to this. It should be enough almost for you, I think."

"Almost!" coolly. She turned a calm smileless face to his. "You think I should feel regret," she said. "You will deem me a devil when I tell you that I feel only—satisfaction."

Then her tone changed to a sudden fierceness that seemed to sweep all before it.

"See you!" cried she in a voice vindictive—terrible. "I hated her always! I *knew* her on that first cursed night when in all her beauty she entered the room and stood before me. I knew her as well as though, in black and white, her story was writ upon the wall that faced me. There stood my sin before me—living! inexorable! Oh!" She put out her hands as though she would have crushed that slight stricken figure near her. "If I could have *killed* her, I would!"

"Be silent, woman," said Wriothesley with authority.

"What a tone from you to me," said she, a mocking inflection in her voice. "Have you forgotten a time when you only piped or sang, wept or laughed, at my command? Truly men's memories are short, but women's long-lived, and revenge is mine this day!"

A low cruel laugh fell from her lips.

"I have the best of it *now*," she said pointing to Marvel, a crushed, mournful figure. "You think me inhuman," she went on turning lightly to Wriothesley. "Perhaps you are right, but if so, the world has been the cause of it. What! Shall I suffer all things at its hands and show no fight; make no sign? A cruel fate blighted my best days; the same cruel fate pursues me to this day, and shall I when my hour comes forbear to strike? All my life long my dearest hopes have been blasted, almost as fruition seemed near, within my grasp. The one creature whom I loved

was taken from me when as yet I was but a child; the one great ambition of my existence, a chance that would have raised me high above even my fondest aspirations, slipped from my hold almost as my fingers closed upon it. Death once again stepped in and slew my ambition as it had slain my love. And to have been a duchess! That would have compensated for all."

She closed and unclosed her fingers rapidly, and an expression of baffled desire, of a disappointment too great almost to be borne, darkened her face.

"That old man! Had he but lived but one short day," she said between her teeth. "The malignancy of fate!"

She drew her breath sharply and recovered herself; as she did so she caught Wriothesley's glance fixed on her, and a derisive smile parted her lips.

"And you—you poor fool!" she said with a bitter sneer, "throughout all that time you believed that I loved you. You could not see that you were the simple tool kept ever near me to urge that old man to lay his title at my feet. You could not realize that even as you knelt at my feet and poured out there all the treasures of your love, that you were less than nothing to me, and mere means to an end in which you would have no part. And what a lover you made!" she laughed aloud. "An ideal one! What raptures! What ecstasies! What protestations! And how inexpressibly they bored me at all times."

"I thank heaven they did!" said Wriothesley vehemently. The hot blood mounted to his brow and shame covered him. That *she*—that poor stricken child—should hear all this now, at a moment when so terrible a sorrow was crushing the very life out of her, seemed a very refinement of cruelty. "Have you no shame in you that you talk so—now; when all that past madness is over and done; when you know——"

"That you love her now and not me? That you love her perhaps as you never loved me even in your best days? Oh, yes, I know all that. But I know too that the memory of that past will rankle in her future and spoil whatever happy hours the future may give her."

Wriothesley did not hear her last words, he was watching

Marvel. Had she heard this woman's own assurance that his old fierce passion for her was indeed dead?—that his love for her—his wife—burned warmly, purely, as that first had never done? Oh, if she could but hear! He looked at the tall, childlike, motionless form with its face buried against the wall and his heart died within him. What could compensate to her for such misery as was hers to-day?

Still, *had* she heard? And if so, did she believe? It might at least (even if she did not care) be some slight reparation. But he could not judge, by her, if one word had entered into her. She stood silent, in an attitude that spoke only of despair.

Presently, however, as if she felt the magnetism of his gaze, she slowly lifted her head and turned her face towards him. There was a terrible self-reproach upon it, a remorse that was painful.

"How can I ever hope that you will forgive me?" she said. "The disgrace—the shame—*what* could wash it out! Ah," sighing heavily and turning weary eyes on Mrs. Scarlett, "you were right indeed when you said I had ruined his life!"

"I am glad of it," said Mrs. Scarlett brusquely.

"Oh, mother! Oh, *mother!*" cried the girl in a sharp tone of passionate reproach—of unutterable misery. She let her face fall forward into her hands. There was a moment's dead pause, after that wild, strange cry, and then——

Something dreadful had happened, as it seemed to them, all at once and without an instant's warning. There had been a little rustle of Mrs. Scarlett's gown, and instinctively Marvel and Wriothesley had looked towards her. She was livid, ghastly; her hands were clutching the back of a chair near her, and she was swaying from side to side as one in mortal agony.

Marvel rushed to her and caught her in her arms. She had been quicker than Wriothesley. Mrs. Scarlett's grasp upon the chair relaxed, and she pressed her right hand convulsively to her side.

"Oh, this pain! this anguish!" she moaned. Broken words fell from her lips—the sweat stood out upon her brow, and then presently there came a great silence.

Ste was still lying senseless in Marvel's arms when at last he servants came in answer to Wriothesley's continued ringing, and lifted her from where she was half stretched upon the ground.

They bore her away and carried her upstairs to her chamber and laid her on her bed, where she lay inert, unconscious even long after the arrival of the doctor who had been summoned with all haste. Another was telegraphed for to town and the whole house was in a commotion.

She recovered consciousness a little later on, but was by the physicians declared to be in a very critical state. She went from one fit of insensibility into another, and only as the chill cold morning broke, rallied slightly. Marvel was with her then, and she appeared to know and put out her hand feebly towards her. It was the first sign that she had given of knowing any one of those who stood around her.

The guests staying at Grangemore faded away as swiftly as shadows; the presence of death scared them, and besides their visits had drawn to an end. At last no one was left in the house save Sir George Townshend—who would not go in spite of all his lady-love's hints, who was put out by Mrs. Scarlett's bad taste in choosing her house as a hospital—Wriothesley, Marvel, and the invalid.

The condition of the latter varied from day to day. A nurse had been sent down from town, but when the paroxysms of pain, which now followed one upon another with startling and distressing frequency, seized upon the patient, it was found that Marvel only had power to soothe and calm her. So much so that the physicians looked round instinctively for Lady Wriothesley's pale, sad face and slight girlish figure when the pains caught the wasted figure in the bed and rent her sore.

And Marvel answered to their call. She clung, with a persistency that annoyed Cicely beyond measure, to the sick room, devoting herself with an eagerness that puzzled every one but Wriothesley to the irritable creature whom disease had brought from high estate to be low as any peasant-born.

Cicely remonstrated with Marvel now mildly, now angrily. Was she going to throw away her health, her beauty, for a

woman who had scorned and insulted her unceasingly so long as opportunity was given, and who was safe to do it again if ever she rose from her sick couch? Humanity was a charming thing, no doubt—the forgiveness of trespasses a duty, but there was always a limit to all things. One should draw the line at a certain point, or overwhelming ruin would be the consequence.

And Marvel would shake her head and smile her little pale spiritless smile that always made Cicely long to shake her and then cry over her, but not for word or scolding or coaxing would she forsake that chamber where the stricken woman lay.

Only this, she begged of Cicely that she would keep Wriothesley out of it! His presence might disturb the sick woman she said; but there was such violent, if suppressed, anxiety in her tone as she pressed the matter on her, that Cicely could not help wondering afterwards if it were possible that jealousy still reigned in that gentle bosom.

She was so far troubled by Marvel's vehemence about this thing that she even mentioned it to Wriothesley, being of opinion that much reticence on certain delicate points had led to a great deal of the world's disorder. She watched him keenly as she spoke and noted how his colour changed.

In truth, he had guessed, long before, the reason why she so secluded herself, why she so shrank from meeting him. That horrible revelation which had been poured with such venom into her ears on that luckless afternoon stood now between him and her like a black cloud, impenetrable, unpierceable. She *would* not meet him. She feared to look into his eyes. It hurt him indescribably to feel how small was the trust she placed in him, how entirely dead she was to the real and very honest affection he entertained for her. Were all the world before him to choose therefrom the one he loved, she, and she alone, would be his choice.

He said very gently to Cicely that Marvel was right, that no doubt the presence of any stranger beyond the physicians and her servants would distress Mrs. Scarlett in her present low condition; that he sympathized, too, with

Marvel's desire to attend upon her. Doctor Bland had told him that Marvel's voice alone soothed her, and he could well believe that. She, Marvel, as Cicely no doubt had noted, had a voice wonderfully low and sweet, an excellent thing in any woman.

But to himself he said that he would combat this determination of his wife's to avoid him. He would see her at all risks, and compel her to look into his eyes and read there the love for her that filled him.

For this purpose he waited, and watched the corridor that led from her own chamber to the sick-room and back again, and at last one night, when day was dead and all the lamps made bright the winding passages and stairs, he met her face to face close to her own door.

CHAPTER LV.

"Just when I seemed about to learn!
Where is the thread now? Off again!
The old trick! Only I discern—
Infinite passion and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn."

* * * * *

"And hope is brightest when it dawns from fears."

It was the first time they had been face to face, *en tete-à-tete*, since the miserable hour when she had been declared that most mournful of all things—one basely born. The hot blood mounted to her cheek, and she stepped back quickly, as though she would have retreated into the doorway behind her, but he caught her hand and held her fast.

"What is the meaning of it?" he said. "Why do you avoid me like this? There is a great deal of folly in it all, is there not?"

He held her hand closely, and tried to draw her to him, but she resisted passionately.

"*Do* not," she said. "Ah! let me go. It is such pain to see you, such a humiliation. If you only understood you would not try to keep me."

"It is because I understand that I do keep you. Marvel, is your own grief the only thing that touches you? Am I nothing? Can I not feel, too?"

She shrank from him.

"Do you think I don't know it?" she said. "Bad as it is for me, how far, *far* worse it must be for you. And now it is hopeless! Oh! if that first time on the yacht, when I found out that you loved *her*, if then I had only had the courage to drown myself, how well it would have been. But even now, I *cannot;* I haven't the strength of mind; I am afraid; and afterwards, that would be so terrible."

"What are you saying?" cried he angrily. "Are you out of your mind that you say such wicked things? Good heavens! what a fool a child like you can be! And this great misfortune of yours, what does it come to? Why nothing. Things are very much as they were a week ago. We anticipated always what we now know, and for my part I care not one jot."

"Is that true?" Her melancholy eyes sought his, and seemed to burn into them. "Ah! do not lie to me," she said.

"My dear girl," said Wriothesley with very great tenderness, "why should I do that? I have lied to no man ever, why should I lie to you? The fact is you have dwelt so long in the unhealthy atmosphere of that sick-room that you grow morbid. Give yourself some relaxation. You want air and the warm sunshine to give a wholesome colour to your thoughts."

"That sounds so easy," she said with a little mournful smile. "You do not understand—how could you? You would help me, I know," with a swift warm glance at him. "Do it then. Forget me. Cease to let the remembrance of me trouble you. Blot me out of your life in so far as you can."

"I shall not do that certainly," said he cheerfully. "You are part of my life, and as such I shall hold you. We are bound to each other, you and I, by all the laws of man and God, and I shall not be the one to sever the link You distrust, you spurn me, but I shall wait. Time, I believe, will help me."

"Time! Ah, that is what I fear," said she with a quick shudder. "The long, long loveless years before me. And I am so young, so terribly young. All my life lies before me, and in it there is no hope—*none*. Death comes to the happy, the well-beloved—it will not come to me."

"You *are* well-beloved, if you would only know it," said he with emotion.

"Ah, yes; there is Cicely, and——" she paused.

The vision of Savage rose up before him as he had last been seen. A man impassioned, half desperate with a love he hardly dared reveal.

"You still think of him," he said coldly.

"I think always of the very few who really love me. Are you angry about that?" simply. "Do not; I felt no love for *him*—ever." It was impossible to disbelieve her. She turned to him feverishly: "I have forgotten him, all, everything," she said impetuously. "There is but one thing that I dream of day and night. I cannot sleep, I cannot eat because of it. Oh!" with a passion of despair, "I cannot bear it."

"Endure what?" asked he, made anxious by her manner.

She paused, and then came nearer to him on tiptoe, as though fearing she might be heard.

"That she should be my mother!" she said at last in a panting whisper. "*She*, of all others! Oh, it is horrible! That she should be my mother, *so!* It is killing me! If I could only wake up and find it all a hideous nightmare; if I could blot out all these past terrible days, and feel again the glorious uncertainty about my history that I once so madly fought against, how happy I should deem myself. But I *cannot!*" with a burst of misery. "It is all true, *true*, TRUE!"

"Marvel, have courage. Even if it be so——"

"Always, it seems to me, I felt, I knew it, but only as a child might who could not reason. Oh, to be dead!" said she in a little cold still way that frightened him.

"I tell you," said he angrily, "that you stay too long in that close sick-room. It depresses you, and with all the other ills you have to bear is more than you have strength

for. If I could, I would forbid you to enter that woman's room again; but though I am your husband, I know you will not submit to me in even the smallest matter. Still, for the sake of old times——"

"*Don't!*" she put up her hands to her head and pushed back her hair in a little distracted fashion. "Don't speak like that. Oh, if I could only undo my wretched marriage, if only I could feel once more that you were not bound to me!—that you were *not* my husband!"

He bit his lip, and a frown settled on his brow. With gloomy eyes he regarded her.

"You may not think it," he said at last, "but—pardon me for saying it—you are uncommonly rude!"

"I am not, and you know it. I am only miserable," protested she, great tears standing in her eyes.

"You make yourself so. This—this unfortunate story that was so remorselessly made known to you, is a secret between me and you. Why should it not remain so? You have not told Cicely?" His gaze was anxious as he asked her this, and she saw it, and told herself he feared the world's comments on the woman who bore his name—on the luckless creature whose history, if once known, would bring down upon her the scorn and contempt of all those amongst whom she now moved as a young and radiant queen. The thought was agony to her.

"Do not fear. I have told no one," she said coldly. And then, holding out to him her hand, "Good-night."

He bent over it and kissed it.

"You will not promise me then to go to your own room to-night?—to cease, for even a few hours, your attendance in that enervating atmosphere?"

"I cannot. My duty lies there," she said, coldly still.

He watched her as she moved away from him up the lighted corridor. The step that once was light and buoyant as a young fawn's was now slow and spiritless, her head had taken a little dejected bend. She went heavily, as one oppressed with a grief that knew no assuagement. She puzzled him almost as much as she distressed him. What if there was yet another and a worse sorrow gnawing at her heart! If it were only the misfortune of her birth

he thought he should have been able to comfort and sustain her. What if she did in reality lament her marriage with him—not because of the shame attached to her, and that prompted her to fly from all men and bury her face out of sight—but because she was remembering the words and looks of another—of Savage!

He drew a sharp breath and threw up his head as this suspicion crossed his mind. Then he flung it from him with a passionate denial of the truth of it, and turned and went away.

Meantime, Marvel sitting by the sick bed was wearily recalling that anxious look upon his face, and torturing herself with the belief that already the horror, the fear of discovery, had entered into him. Already he was beginning to learn that his life was spoiled, and that lesson once learnt, with what regard would he look on her—the despoiler? And yet, in all these thoughts she wronged him. The anxiety he had felt and shown had been for her alone. Naturally enough, there were moments when his pride shrank from the cruel fact that his wife—she who had taken a place beside all the great and stainless names that had made up the lengthy roll of his ancestry—should stand beneath a shameful cloud; but all his sympathy, his love, were with her, and it was to shield her from cruel comment, from the bitter stings and wounds of the world, that he had enjoined on her a necessity for secresy.

All through the lonely silent watches of the night she sat there brooding beside the half dead woman, ministering to her now and then, but always with her mind embittered, despairing. The nurse once or twice expostulated with her, entreating her even to lie down upon the couch at the end of the room, but Marvel had refused all entreaties, and sat there speechless, wakeful, with pale set face and haggard eyes.

Now and then a moan came from the bed. And then she would rise and bend over the sick woman, and with gentle arms raise her, pressing the pillows into such shape as seemed best to suit her. Very seldom as she did this did she glance at her—some strong repulsion withholding her gaze—but once or twice when compelled

to look she met the strange piercing eyes of Mrs. Scarlett fixed on her.

"Is there anything you want?" she would say then, kindly if coldly, and the answer was always the same—"Nothing."

Yet, if Marvel stirred from the bedside she would grow instantly restless, the moans grew louder, and the poor tired head would move ceaselessly from side to side with a terrible impatience, and the face changed from a death-like calm to a miserable forgetfulness. A face lovely still, in spite of all the anguish and the strange sleeplessness that not all the doctors' skill could combat. Great hollows now lay beneath the wonderful eyes; the lovely cruel lips were bloodless; the soft luxuriant hair was gone. But the beauty that had lured many men could not even by these means be altogether killed, and the wreck that lay upon the pillows, silent, motionless, was yet a beautiful one.

For hours she had not spoken, and at last the day broke Marvel stood up and drew aside the curtains, and gazed out upon the slow, unwilling dawning of this wild March morning. She opened the window softly and leaned out. From the south there came to her a grand refreshing breeze, a breath from the sweetly-smelling wind-blown fields that seemed to catch her, and cling to her. It was heavenly breath, and she sighed deeply as if to drink it in. Her sad heart was comforted by it for the moment, and her dreamy sensitive nature revived beneath its influence.

The spring, "the winter's overthrow," was slowly but surely "coming up this way," and there was a sense of life—young, fresh, vigorous—in all the air.

Yet, even as she drew in that sweet refreshing draught, grief lay in her heart. She could not shake it from her. The humiliation, the sense of being not as others are weighed her down. Of all:

> "Life's sad mistakes
> That sad lives see,"

it seemed to her that hers was the saddest.

A slight sound from the bed startled her. She closed the window swiftly but noiselessly, and went back to her

post. She leant over the invalid and lifted her head as usual, shaking up the pillows and then laying her tenderly down on them. But when, having done this, she would have gone again, Mrs. Scarlett caught her gown and by a feeble hand detained her.

"What is it?" asked Marvel, compelling herself to look at her, though a strong shudder shook her as she did so. She might be—nay, she *was*—her mother, but it was too late for love of any kind to blossom for her in her breast. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Nearer," breathed the sick woman faintly. Marvel bent over her until her face almost touched hers.

"There is something I must say to you——" The words came faintly, with a terrible effort, from between the pale parched lips.

"When you are stronger, better," urged Marvel, who shrank with a sick loathing from the thought of discussion of any kind—of confidences or regrets, or sick bed repentances—about the terrible story that had ruined her life.

"No; there is no time. I must speak now—or never. Nearer, nearer still. I want to tell you," raising her eyes that burned like living coals in her wan face, to Marvel's, "*that I lied to you!*"

She half lifted herself in the bed, and clutched the girl by the arm.

"There *was* a marriage! I lied about it to revenge myself upon him, Wriothesley; but now, with death staring me in the face, I—I haven't the courage to—— Yes, we were married secretly, but surely. There is no doubt ——" She broke off, exhausted.

"Is *this* the truth?" asked Marvel. Her face had grown colourless, her voice was cold and stern. She did not believe this last statement. She knew that she did not *dare* believe it. Were she to do so, only to find herself deceived, she felt that it would kill her. No, there was no truth in it. Such joy, such an almost terrible relief, could not be for her.

"The truth, yes. Will you not believe? Why should I say this *now?*"

"The proofs," said Marvel in a strange frozen tone. She would compel her to end this cruel farce.

The feeble hands made a movement towards her pillows.

"Underneath," she whispered faintly; and Marvel, always as in a dream, ran her hand under the pillows and drew out a tiny bunch of keys. In one of her calmer moments Mrs. Scarlett had asked for them, and had placed them herself beneath her head; now she had not strength to draw them out again.

"My dressing-case," she said. She pointed out one of the keys. "The second tray."

Marvel crossed the room mechanically, opened the dressing-case, and lifted the tray she had named. Some papers folded in it met her eye; she took them out, and approached the bed. Her heart was beating now to suffocation. She lifted one hand to her throat to stifle the sob of painful excitement that rose in it.

"Open—read," said the dying woman. "It is my marriage certificate and the certificate of your birth. Keep them. If I have injured you living, you will remember when I am gone that I served you dying. Go. Take them to him."

Marvel had fallen on her knees beside the bed. She was trembling violently. When presently a cold, beautiful hand stole towards her and touched her she caught it and drew it beneath her bent head, and pressed her lips to it in a passion of gratitude. She felt faint, uncertain, frightened; but above and through all she was conscious of a great and glorious freedom—a breaking of the vile bonds that had chained her to the earth and turned the very light of day into a sullen gloom. To go to *him;* to tell *him:* that was her first thought.

Through the tumult of her conflicting emotions the slow, broken voice came to her, as it were, the touch of sorrow that ever accompanies our joy:

"You said it once—that strange word—to *me.* It killed me, I think; yet I would hear it again."

She spoke with difficulty, and very indistinctly; but Marvel understood.

"*Mother!*" she whispered, and pressed the hand she held, and stooping forward kissed the pale mouth. She felt that the kiss was returned, and could see that an ex-

pression of rest, of peace, fell on the beautiful face. She rose to her feet and bent more closely over her. Mrs. Scarlett had evidently sunk into a calm sleep, worn out, as Marvel thought, by the excitement of the moment.

She summoned the nurse hurriedly.

"Is she sleeping? Will it be safe to leave her for a little while?" she asked eagerly. "If you think she will wake soon I should rather stay; but if not——"

She paused for an answer. The woman was looking at the senseless face. *She* knew the dread sign that lay on it, the last seal of all.

"She will not wake soon, my lady; you may safely leave her for awhile," she said, knowing that her patient would never wake again from the exhausted swoon into which she had fallen. But she had been given strict orders by Wriothesley and the doctors to get Lady Wriothesley out of the way by any means in her power before the last dread summons came, and she was glad of this chance that came to her.

"Call me if you see any change," said Marvel, lingering still, though in such mad haste to be gone. She had the papers clasped to her bosom, and with one last glance at the sleeping face she left the room, and sped down the corridor to where she knew Wriothesley's apartments were.

It was still very early, and only a few of the servants were moving here and there through the halls and passages. As she reached her husband's room she tapped impatiently, hurriedly upon the panel of the door.

"Who is there?" cried he in a rather sleepy tone.

"It is I, Marvel," she said. She could have cried a'oud to him, but she compelled herself to a calmness that almost hurt her.

"You!" His voice sounded startled, and she could hear how he sprang out of his bed. The minutes that followed seemed to her like so many interminable hours.

"Oh! hurry, hurry!" she cried at last. "How long, how terribly long you are!"

He flung open the door at last, and looked at her anxiously. She was so white, and was trembling so much that he went to her and placed his arm round her.

"She is dead?" he said, thinking, *fearing*, that she had witnessed her mother's death.

"No. Oh, no. It is not that. Let me in and I will tell you all," she said. He drew her into the room, and closed the door. She held out to him her precious papers with hands that shook.

"Oh! read, *read!*" she cried. "Oh! Fulke! after all she was *married*. I am not such a disgrace to you. She was *really* married."

She broke down then, overcome by the nervous excitement of the past half-hour, and, sinking into an armchair, burst into a passion of tears.

"My dear child, what is it? What has happened?" said he, apprehensively terrified by her tears; but she pushed him away from her.

"Don't mind me," she sobbed; "mind nothing but *that*," pointing to the papers, "and read, *read*, READ! Oh! I am so *happy*."

"Oh! are you?" said he a little lamely. Then, as though giving up the situation, he let her cry on contentedly, and addressed himself to an examination of the papers she had given him.

His colour changed as he read them. Thank Heaven for *her!* was his first thought. As he saw her vehement abandonment to her relief and joy he realized more thoroughly than he had done before the overwhelming despair that had been hers.

"Thank God, my dear," he said simply, but earnestly. He bent over her and gravely kissed her cheek. "I thought it must be some great misfortune that had driven you to me. I am glad to know you would come to me in your joy too."

"It was not so much that," said she, flushing faintly, "as the knowledge that it was due to you to let you hear at once that the disgrace you—you felt so heavily was no longer yours."

Some soft reproach in the tone, some little undercurrent, betrayed to him her meaning.

"Did you think it was only myself I pitied?" he said; "that I did not feel for you far more deeply than for any

annoyance it could cause me? Why, what a selfish fellow you must think me. Perhaps," with a regretful remembrance of all those months in which he had virtually deserted her, "you have had reason. However, I shall not scold you to-day," smiling; "you are too happy to heed me."

She laughed in return. He was dressed only in his shirt and trousers, but he was looking very handsome, she thought, and very friendly. She accepted the hour as it was, though she had small dependence on the constancy of it; and besides, how could she look on anything save with rose-hued glasses with all this wealth of new-born gladness in her heart?

"If I had known you were coming," said he, looking round at the rather disorderly room, "I should have furbished up my belongings a bit, and put my best foot foremost; but as it is——"

"Well, certainly you *are* untidy," said she, with a pretty air of contempt, giving a dainty glance here and there to where books lay upon the floor, and to where, on a distant table, a box of cigars were strewn about. "You want some one to look after you more than anybody I know."

"Well, that's what *I* think," agreed he cordially.

He caught her hand and drew her towards him. A little soft blush rose and dyed her cheek.

At this moment there came a sharp, hurried knocking at the door. Wriothesley opened it, and one of Marvel's women, not seeing her, came quickly in and spoke to him:

"The nurse bid me come to you, my lord. Mrs. Scarlett is dead. It was quite sudden; she——"

Wriothesley was too late in putting up the warning hand —Marvel had heard. A low, gasping cry broke from her, and, overcome by the long, painful vigil of the night gone by, and all the conflicting emotions that had followed so hard upon it, she sank back in a dead faint upon the ottoman behind her.

CHAPTER LVI.

"What they could my words expressed,
O my love, my all, my one!"

"Time shall die, and Love shall be
Lord, as Time was over Death."

MRS. SCARLETT was buried with all pomp and ceremony in the Scarlett vault, somewhere in the heart of Surrey. Marvel was too prostrated to accompany her to the tomb, though some morbid desire to show her every respect urged her to do it; and Mrs. Verulam would not permit Wriothesley to go. There had been enough of gossip about her and him, she said, in the past. Why revive it again? It was only a boyish infatuation, of course, when all was told; but the world was an insatiable monster where scandal was concerned, and would be sure to say all sorts of witty and wicked things if they heard he had gone (as "chief mourner" they would have called it) to her funeral. Why should he betray a deeper interest in her than all those other thousand and one acquaintances who were too overburdened by the cares of society to attend to her last resting-place the queen to whom they had paid such slavish court when she was living?

There was a sense of disgust and hatred towards the dead woman in Wriothesley's breast that would not be subdued, and that helped him to acquiesce in Mrs. Verulam's decision. Her treatment of the poor child who now in her darkened chamber was lying, suffering horribly from nervous headache, angered him against her, harmless now for ever though she was, and made him bitterly self-contemptuous as he remembered how, for her worthless sake, he had once cruelly hurt and offended the sweet nature of his wife.

When the nervous attack wore itself off in due time, Marvel insisted on going into deep mourning, and then of course it was necessary to take Cicely into their confidence. She had a theory that to be astonished at anything this age could show, argued a weakening intellect; but for

once in her life she had to acknowledge herself as entirely and stupidly amazed on hearing of Marvel's parentage.

She it was, however, who at once saw the necessity of enlightening the world about it. It was impossible that Marvel should be allowed to live for ever with a stigma resting on her name—a cloud of mystery surrounding her. Immediate steps should be taken to declare her real origin, which, if it had a rather unpleasant flavour of secrecy about it, was nevertheless honourable. It would be a nine-days' wonder, nothing more. Something else would crop up even whilst the public gaped and laughed and whispered over it, something that would be probably more *piquante* and would therefore obliterate it.

But where should Marvel and he go for those "nine days?" That was a question that troubled Wriothesley. It was out of the question that she should receive and be received whilst the storm burst and lasted. He would not have her subjected to unkind comment or impertinent curiosity; and good birth does not give good manners, and there were many in their own world who would be sure to insult and annoy her.

To take her away for an indefinite time—abroad, anywhere out of the hurley-burley of society, was his strong desire; but how to compass it troubled him. She had shown such a passionate determination to go nowhere with him on his first return, that he hardly dared make mention of the idea again, or, at least, did not dare hope that a second request would receive a different answer.

And time proved his fear true. She shrank openly from his suggestion, and turned coldly from him when he made it, with a distressed expression in her great sorrowful eyes.

"But it is so necessary," he urged gently, battling against the sense of angry disappointment that was filling him. "The truth must be made known, for your sake, and how can you stay here to face it, to be asked questions by the many vulgar people who yet belong to our set? They will not spare you. They would spare nothing to satisfy their "curiosity."

"If Cicely could come. If we might make up a party," she said faintly. He could see how terrible it would be to

her to be *en tete-a-tete* with him. He bit his lip and looked down. How could he argue with her—how persuade? Pride stood up in arms and forbade it.

He explained to her, however, that Cicely could not come. Cicely whose hands were so full of her own affairs, whose coming marriage occupied all her time.

"Could I not go to the north, then?" she asked timidly. "And you, anywhere you will; time would pass all the same. And when, as you think, the world would have forgotten, we could meet again——"

"Oh, no! I entreat you do not incline to that plan," he said earnestly. "When, during those first months of our married life I kept away from you, I did wrong. I did you an unspeakable injury! Let us not repeat that fault. Do not give farther food for talk. It would be madness to let that word separation be so much as *named* between us again."

She sighed wearily. It was indeed terrible to her to think of long months spent alone with him. Months in which she would feel each hour of the day that he was isolating himself for her sake, that he was growing every moment more bored, more *ennuyé*, more inclined to curse the fate that had bound him to her. The whole thing would be an annoyance, a *gene* to him, and she felt she could not endure it. If he loved her she could, she thought, have let him make any sacrifice for her sake, but this friendly indifference that she believed he alone felt for her would not permit of her doing so.

And yet he had already done so much for her. He was so kind, so thoughtful—there was no one like him on earth she thought—that she knew she should not have the courage to combat any wish of his.

"It shall be as you like," she said hopelessly. Her tone cut him to the heart.

"Why do you speak like that?" he said very gently. "Does it make you so *very* miserable to think you must have my companionship *only* for a few months? My dear! what a sad thought that must be for both of us. We are bound together for life, and yet you shrink from a few continuous days spent together. Marvel, look at me! You

have made friends of others. Why not accept me as a friend too? Surely I am not beyond the pale of mere friendship in your eyes? If it were not for your own good I should abandon the idea altogether, but you know it would not do for you to stay here—just at present. You hate the idea of going anywhere with me I know, but yet I beg you to consent to the plan for your own sake."

"If I hate it," said she tremulously, turning away her head, "surely you hate it doubly."

"I? No, indeed. If—if I could be assured that you loved me," hastily, and trying to read her averted face, "I should find my chiefest happiness in being with you for ever! Surely you must know that!" Moved by some sudden inspiration he went to her, and drew her closely to him, and stooping, pressed his cheek to hers. "Darling! Darling heart!" he said, "why can't we try to be better friends than we are?"

His tone was low, unsteady, but warm with the deathless breath of love!

She felt it! She turned to him, and in a moment was in his arms.

"Oh, to be friends again!" she cried. She was sobbing wildly, passionately. "In the dead, dear days the friends we were! Oh! do, *do* try to love me again."

"My sweetheart! my darling, I love you now, as I *never* loved you then."

"You say it. But is it *really* so? *Really?* Is it *true?* Oh! Fulke, if I thought you really loved me——"

"I do with all my soul!"

"You are not saying it because you think it will please or comfort me?"

"My darling—no. Because it is the only truth; because it comforts myself—and you too; say that, Marvel!"

He raised her face to his.

"Oh! if you only *knew!*" she said. She clung to him with all her young strength in a very passion of happiness.

"Well, I *don't* know—you forget how you have starved me on such matters," said he, as glad as she was, holding her to his heart. "Tell me now; say you love me."

She said it very sweetly, and returned his kiss as she did so.

"And you forgive me everything?"

"*If* there is anything, I have forgotten. And you," bending back from him to watch his face, "you don't really think I was in love with Nigel Savage?"

"Oh no, not now!" laughing.

"Or ever?"

"Or ever" But that wasn't quite true.

At this propitious instant Mrs. Verulam burst into the room, evidently full of important tidings.

"See here, you two," she was beginning when she stopped dead short. "Eh? what? Anything happened?" she asked, looking from one guilty countenance to the other.

There was a considerable pause. Marvel looked down and played nervously with her rings. Wriothesley, who looked decidedly awkward, at last broke into an irresistible laugh.

"We've only been making it up," he said, rather boyishly.

"And a good thing too," cried Mrs. Verulam brightly. "But you'll have to rehearse the second edition of it somewhere else. I see Lucy's carriage coming down the avenue; she has heard all; she will have you both in to cross-examine you about Marvel's romantic story if you don't clear out without a second's delay. No, don't go into the library, she is capable of searching the house, and as for locked doors, why the breaking open of them would be mere child's play to her! Be wise, therefore, whilst yet there is time, and there's very little of it," craning her neck round the corner of the window, "for here she comes. Make for the orchard, children, and hide there until this danger is past!"

There was evidently not a moment to be lost. Wriothesley threw a fur cloak over Marvel's shoulders and Cicely pushed into her hand a little fur cap, and thus equipped she followed Wriothesley out through the window into the brilliant April afternoon, and together, like a pair of children, they ran hand in hand to the orchard.

CHAPTER LVII.

"Love, if you knew the light
That your soul casts in my sight,
How I look to you
For the pure and true.
And the beauteous and the right—
Bear with a moment's spite
When a mere mote threats the white!"

ARRIVED there, however, a sudden unaccountable fit of shyness took possession of Marvel. Her words grew into monosyllables, and she walked beside him demurely down the shady pathways, hedged on either side by espaliered apple trees and sweet with the thousand perfumes that rise to greet the spring.

The warm buzzing of many bees came from the Mediterranean heath in the corner, and the barberry bushes too seemed full of them. There was a delicious sense of growth everywhere. The day was very still and almost warm; one of those lovely capricious afternoons that come as a forerunner of the summer travelling towards us.

Yet Marvel walked with head down-bent and eyes averted from her companion, who fain would looked love into eyes that spoke again. But hers said nothing; and it seemed to him that she scarcely answered him, that she seemed dead to the strange beauty of this day, that to him appeared so high above its fellows. Why should this fanciful, cold little mood have caught her now of all times? In this wonderfully happy hour, in this sweetest of all seasons, in

"The soft awakening springtime
When 'tis hard to live alone?"

He let a silence fall between them after a bit, and then he looked at her again, and then he laughed. It had dawned upon him at last that the coldness was only shyness. What a child she still was!

"I believe you are afraid of me," he said teazingly.

"I am not!" she denied with haste, colouring vividly.

"Why should you think so? It isn't that, only——" she hesitated and came to a standstill opposite to him, and began to roll a pebble beneath her foot slowly, thoughtfully, "only—there is *something!*" she said.

"Well, let's hear it," said he, thinking how lovely she looked with that half childish, half petulant air, that sat so sweetly on her.

"Oh, no! I couldn't *say* it. But——"

"You can *think* it, whatever it is. Now, Marvel, are you already beginning to doubt me again? What is there worth thinking about or saying, darling, except that you love me, and that I love you?"

"Ah," said she, with a reproachful glance at him, "but you loved her too!"

"Well, so I did," regretfully. He felt now ashamed of that old passion and wished with all his soul he could have blotted it out of his memory and hers. "You must have seen and heard, Marvel, that most men fancy themselves in love once at all events in their lives before they meet the woman they really *do* love."

"*You* didn't fancy it," remorselessly.

"No," abandoning that weak corner, "I did not." A pause. "That's true!" A second, longer pause. Evidently she was not going to help him out; and he felt he was hardly getting on with his defence or acquitting himself in any manner that could be called satisfactory. "But as I love you now," he went on hurriedly, "and you only, I think you might try to forget it."

"I suppose so," dejectedly, drooping her lovely head and declining altogether to look at him. "And yet I can't *bear* to think that once you thought of nothing but *her*."

"My darling girl, why won't you try to look deeper into it——"

"*Deeper?* Oh, if I did *that*," eloquently.

"You would find," eagerly, "that it was a mere boyish attachment. *Nothing* in it—nothing, I assure you." Had he indeed forgotten? "She was ever so much older than I was. Old enough to be my mother."

"She was *not*," indignantly. "She was only about thirty-

five then, and you were twenty-eight or so—she *couldn't* be your mother at *seven*, I suppose?"

"No, of course not," with abject surrender. "But yet if you come to think of it, and if she were alive now, she *would* be my mother, eh?"

"That has nothing to do with it," severely. She turned aside from him and plucked petulantly a budding leaf off a raspberry bush at her elbow. He still held one of her hands, and would have drawn her to him, but she resisted.

"No! I won't—I can't! I can never get that horrid past out of my head. I can quite fancy it all," she went on with a little frown; "I can positively *see* you; following her about all day, and sitting at her feet, and—— *Oh!*" breaking off suddenly and blushing scarlet, as she pulled her hand out of his, and glanced at him with a touch of indignant anguish in her eyes. "You needn't deny it," she said with agitation; "it would be useless. I shouldn't believe you if you did, because you *know* you used to kiss her."

"Only once! Once only, I give you my honour," declared he earnestly.

"Once!"

"I'll swear to it, if you like! It was one evening when——"

"Please reserve all the horrid details; I don't want to hear them," interrupted she scornfully, though there was a sense of decided relief in her breast.

If he had only kissed her on one occasion there could not, after all, have been so very much between them as she had been led to believe. Why, he had only just told her (Marvel) that he loved her, and already he had kissed her *four* times! Take one from four and three remains! She was, therefore, the richer by three. There was immense comfort to be deduced from this sum. She only hoped he was telling her the exact truth. She cast a severe glance at him.

"Are you *sure?*" she asked sternly.

"Positive. I remember it," impressively, being very anxious to convince her, "as if it only happened yesterday. I assure you," with growing warmth, "I'm not at all likely to forget it!"

"Oh!" The clearly pronounced monosyllable showed him his mistake in no time. "Are you not indeed!" she went on with a withering intonation. "It must have been quite a remarkable thing of its kind to have made so *lasting* an impression."

"I don't see why you need take it like that," said he miserably. "And, considering how well you know that I am now entirely yours, I think you ought not to mind so much about it."

"*You* minded a great deal when you thought, or *pretended* to think, that I was in love with poor Nigel Savage!"

"*That* was a different affair entirely. *You* were married to me then!"

"And were you not married to me that day on board the yacht when I found you in such depths of grief over that newspaper?"

"Well, but so very *little* married," said he.

She struggled with herself for a moment, and then broke into sudden laughter, sweet and fresh as the rippling of mountain streamlets. *Such* a laugh! merry, delicious, and, above all things, *young!* He started as he heard it. To him it seemed new, yet old; a revelation, yet sounding like something long remembered but lost for time uncountable. Never, during all these late months, had he heard it, but it brought back to him now, on the instant, the old days—calm and untroubled—at The Towers; and once again he saw her, as the child she then was, running down the marble steps and welcoming him home with all a child's joyous *abandon*. Again he seemed to feel the clinging of her soft arm around his neck, and the innocent kiss she had pressed upon his lips! If then he had but known!

How was it he had then never noticed the exquisite gaiety of the laugh that now thrilled him through and through?—now, when she stood a little aloof from him, and kept the loving arms discreetly by her sides, and when her dainty lips looked more made to mock than kiss. Well, he hadn't loved her then! In that the secret lay.

Truly, love of all magicians is the most wonderful!

He was glad to hear those merry sounds come from her parted lips. They assured him that the old free happy

spirit that used to be hers was not altogether as dead within her as he had begun to fear during these past mournful weeks. She had not once laughed so since their marriage morning, but now he knew that she only wanted love and sympathy, and tender care from *him*, to bring back the dimpling smiles to her cheeks and brightness to her lips. It was with a quick sense of delight that he knew now that on this, the first day of their acknowledged attachment—each for each—the old sweet laughter had re-arisen to her lips.

He caught both her hands, and lifting them, pressed his lips caressingly to the pretty pink palms.

"Marvel, tell me," he pleaded, "when you will come away with me—when you will trust yourself to me. I shall not believe you have forgiven that luckless past till then."

CHAPTER LVIII.

"Sweet for a little even to fear, and sweet,
O love, to lay down fear at love's fair feet."

"SURELY there is plenty of time to think of that," said she, blushing softly and smiling more softly still.

"Not so much, if you would escape several severe cross-examinations. And besides, why not come at once? To-morrow we might start. Eh?"

"Why not say now, this instant?" retorted she saucily. "Have I nothing to do, think you, kind sir, but to follow you at a second's notice, barefooted through the world."

"Not barefooted, surely."

"Very nearly so, at all events. I have clothes to get—to pack. No, I could not be ready for some days to come."

"That," reproachfully, "was not how you answered me when first I asked you to marry me."

"Things are different now," said she, with a pretty arch glance at him.

"They are, indeed," cried he. He caught her suddenly and drew her into his embrace, and kissed her with all the tender passion of a lover. "You are mine indeed, now, because you love me. Don't you, Marvel? *Say* it again."

"You know it," she said sweetly.

"My darling! I wish I were younger, for your sake. To be eleven years older than you is a terrible thing. It *does* sound badly, doesn't it now? I daresay you regard me as quite an old fellow if the truth were known. Come, confess now."

"I don't know how I regard you. I only know I would not have you a day older or a day younger than you are. I would not have you changed in any way. Does that content you?"

"If I were not contented to-day, I should indeed be a hopeless case. My pretty darling, you give too much to gain, I fear, so very little."

"Oh, well, if you think I had better consider about it," said she, standing back from him with a little provoking air. They both laughed.

"Now name the day," said he.

"One would think you were proposing all over again."

"*Over again?*" mischievously. "I think it was *you* who——"

She laid her hand upon his lips and flushed hotly.

"You are unkind, you are——"

"A brute! I acknowledge it humbly. But see how you drive me to it, by your persistent cruelty."

"Is it so very necessary that we should leave so soon?"

"Can't you see that for yourself? Are you willing to run the gauntlet of a thousand inquisitive eyes? Could you not be ready on—Wednesday, for instance?"

"Well, if you insist, I suppose so."

"Only because I insist? Will it always be that way? Have I only to insist to get my own will in all things?"

"Yes, until," with a little nod, "I want to insist too."

He laughed. He smoothed down her hair with both his hands, and told himself with fond self gratulation that she was the very dearest thing, and she was his!

"Does your youthful fancy still point towards Athens?" he asked her after a pause. "Or is there any other spot you would prefer towards which to steer your course?"

"No, I am still faithful to Greece. But, one word, Fulke, it is now *my* turn to insist, and I warn you, once for all, that

on board that yacht of yours I will not set my foot. I hate it! In my opinion it"—she lowered her voice—"is unlucky."

"You couldn't set your foot there even if you would. I, too, took such a hatred to it that I sold it the instant I touched English ground. But I have another now—a bigger, finer one; a smart sailer, a regular beauty, which——"

"No, no, no: they are all alike, and they would remind me of—" she paused—"what I wish forgotten. I will go with you to Greece, to the North Pole if you will, by train or sledge or anything else you like, but *not* by sea."

"As you will, sweetheart. And on Wednesday, then, you will be ready?"

"Ready—" she hesitated and looked away from him a little shyly, "and willing," she murmured in a low voice.

This assurance, so sweet, so exquisitely satisfactory, received its just reward.

"When we have done Greece we can go farther and——"

"Fare worse, perhaps."

"Hardly that. It is evident you know little of that classic land. What I mean is that there will be no need for us to return home in a hurry."

"There will be Cicely's marriage?"

"That comes off in May. You could not possibly be back in time for that, you silly child."

"She will be quite an old married woman then," with a sigh, "before I see her again."

"Well, so will you; console yourself with that thought."

"And *you*," said she, with a charming impertinence, "when I'm old what will you be I should like to know?"

"Older," undauntedly.

"Oh, yes, by a month or so perhaps. I like that."

"If you are going to throw my years in my teeth, if you are going to mock my hoary locks, I warn you betimes, Lady Wriothesley, that there will be——"

"Battle, murder and sudden death! Go to, you foolish old man, do you think you would have strength to fight with me? Oh, Fulke! do you remember when you used to teach me cricket, and how horribly frightened I used to be about the balls? What a long time ago it seems now," she sighed "and what a happy time it was."

"Do you regret it?" asked he with such evident anxiety that she turned to him and smiled.

"Oh, no. Happy as it was this is still happier," she said, "only—I wish auntie could see us now."

What a faithful soul, thought he, as he looked with ever-increasing love into the large wistful eyes upraised to his.

"Do you know," she went on, "when I am very miserable or very happy my mind always runs back to my earliest days. You will say it is impossible I should remember that first strange awful night when I entered your home, yet it seems to me always as if I *did* recollect, as if I could see myself, dreamwise, standing wet, cold, disconsolate, outside the window."

"I at least can recollect," said he. "I am glad now to think that it was *I* who heard you, who found you as it were, and drew you in and rescued you from that cruel storm."

"Afterwards you rescued me from a worse storm still—the storm of life." Heavy tears rose to her eyes. "How could I, nameless, have battled with it, had not you given me your name? Oh! I have much to be thankful for."

"So have I, to-day. I confess I didn't think so yesterday. But if you keep that little mournful look on your lovely face I shan't believe that you *are* thankful. Marvel, darling, don't dwell so much on the past."

"Marvel! That is not my name. Did you not see by one of the papers that I was christened Margaret? That must have degenerated into Meg, because you remember how I would say only 'M'g' when first I came to you? That must have been baby language for Meg."

"I don't care," said he decisively. "Marvel you have been to me—and as Marvel I have thought of you for so many years that Marvel you shall remain to me for ever."

CHAPTER LIX.

"Mine own heart's lady with no gainsayings,
You shall be always wholly till I die."

THE world was indeed smitten with amazement when the truth was made public. Her birth being proved, and the

fact established beyond dispute that she was in reality the daughter of Leonie Scarlett, made Marvel one of the greatest heiresses in England. All her mother's money (an enormous fortune left by Mr. Scarlett unreservedly to his wife) fell to her, and helped in a great measure to stem the torrent of scandal that is always only too eager to rise, rush onward, and crush whatever comes in its way.

It seemed to the world that it was a rather amusing thing that Wriothesley should have first loved the mother, then married the daughter; but the knowledge that he and his wife were richer than most bowed low the heads of Mammon's worshippers. After all it was but a young man's folly; there had been nothing on which to look back with shame in that first wild impulsive passion; and when it had died it had left no sting behind it.

Cicely's marriage was a small astonishment to her friends. She had been so determined never again to enter into the bonds of matrimony that when she gave herself to Sir George, "the last man likely to suit her," according to her intimates, everybody lifted his and her brows in mute amazement.

It was a keen disappointment to her that Marvel could not be at her wedding, and she proposed once or twice to put off that important event until she should have returned home. But Wriothesley negatived the proposal; and indeed if she had postponed her marriage until the Wriothesleys came back, she would have had to wait a considerable time.

It was quite twelve months from the day of their departure before they returned to The Towers. It was once again the merry spring time, and all the village was decorated with flags and wreaths in honour of their home-coming. The sun was shining with a brilliancy that lit up the grand old house, and threw tender gleams athwart the budding branches in the silent, sweetly-smelling woods, as they drove through them by the private carriage-way that led direct to the house from the station.

Marvel, as she drew near, gazed intently at the first home she could remember, and a sense of passionate gladness rose within her. As she looked, a tall gaunt form came out upon the doorsteps and waved a welcome to her. It was the

rector, Mr. Bainbridge, her old, true friend. Tears started to her eyes, and she scarcely waited for the carriage to draw up before she sprang to the ground and hastened to him. With a little loving cry, that changed in a moment the beautiful woman he looked at into the child he had known and adored, she threw her arms round his neck and embraced him fondly.

"My dear child! My dear girl!" said he with some agitation. He held her back from him. "So it is well with you?" he said softly.

"So well!" she answered him, her clear eyes fixed on his, and then, "How long it seems since last we met! But I would not come to you when I was in trouble and perplexed. I waited, and now, when I am so happy that I almost fear to think of it, *now* I come back to you, and all that has my first and warmest love. And I do not come alone!"—she turned and beckoned to a woman who stood behind her with something, apparently very precious, in her arms—"see, *see* what I have brought you!" She lifted the precious something from the woman's hold and laid it in Mr. Bainbridge's arms.

It was a baby. But something more than that too, as one could see by her eyes—a treasure, a jewel beyond all price. It seemed strange to the old man watching her to see the great motherly love that shone on the face that was still so full of childhood's grace.

"You knew of it, of course," she was going on gaily. "You saw it in the papers. But what you do *not* know perhaps is, that I have brought him home to be baptized by *you*. Oh yes, it was very wrong, I know. He is quite six weeks; you can scold me by-and-by. But you had married me, and no one else I said should give my boy his name. And I hurried, too; I came as soon as ever I could."

"Too soon," said Wriothesley anxiously, who had come up to them. "See how flushed you are."

"With joy only. I feel no fatigue. How sweet, how *lovely* it is to be in our old dear home again."

"Mr. Bainbridge, my authority is a poor thing. Persuade her to come in and lie down."

She laughed and went up the steps. In the hall, where

all the servants were drawn up to bid her welcome, old Bunch, the housekeeper, who had been her one friend on her strange lonely wedding morn, came away from the other servants and up to her.

"Oh, my lady, this is a joyful day for me," she said.

"For me, too, Bunch," said Marvel, with the sweet graciousness that marked her, stooping to kiss the old woman's withered cheek.

Indeed, she had a word for every servant she knew there, and even a smile for the strangers. It was with difficulty Wriothesley at last persuaded her to take some little rest, so happy, so bright she felt and looked.

"Remember, Cicely Townshend and Sir George will be here to-morrow," he said; "and do not tax your strength too far."

Presently, when he came back to her, he found her lying on a couch, with the baby asleep in a little bassinette beside her. They were alone, those two, who were dearer to him than all the earth besides.

"How contented you look," he said, drawing a chair close to her. "More so, I think, than when we were travelling about alone, you and I."

"Why, naturally," with a glance at the sleeping child. "Isn't it strange," she said; "when we were alone I thought it was impossible earth could hold for me happiness more complete, and yet now——" She paused.

"Go on," said he laughing. "I have been preparing myself for it. I know that in the days to come I shall be cut out in your good graces by that small person over there, and am trying already how to abdicate my throne without loss of dignity."

"Oh, Fulke!" she said reproachfully. She held out to him one lovely slender hand, which he imprisoned in both his own. He was her lover always. "If I thought you meant it I should be wretched. But you don't. You *are* first, you *shall* be first with me always. Believe that, my dearest. Nothing could dethrone you."

She took her hand from his and laid it round his throat.

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